2005

The Limits of the Senses in the Zhongyong

Jane Geaney

*University of Richmond, jgeaney@richmond.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.richmond.edu/religiousstudies-faculty-publications](http://scholarship.richmond.edu/religiousstudies-faculty-publications)

Part of the [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](http://scholarship.richmond.edu/religiousstudies-faculty-publications) and the [Philosophy Commons](http://scholarship.richmond.edu/religiousstudies-faculty-publications)

**Recommended Citation**


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.
The Limits of the Senses in the *Zhongyong*

Jane Geaney

The *Zhongyong* ends with an odd statement about 德 (charisma or virtue). It cites a line from the *Book of Songs* that appears to say that 德 resembles a piece of hair—perhaps in being equally light—but the *Zhongyong* rejects this analogy, noting that 德 is without smell or sound. This seems to be a strange comment since, while it might be plausible to think of hair as smelling, there seems to be no way around the incongruity of speaking of hair in terms of whether or not it makes sound. Perhaps the passage is attempting to say, in a clumsy way, that 德 is completely beyond all sensory capacities. This impression could be reinforced by a similar comment about not seeing or hearing 德 in *Zhongyong* 16. However, a series of contrary descriptions undermines this possibility: in various passages, 德 is described as big (*Zhongyong* 17, 30), small (*Zhongyong* 30), and bright (*Zhongyong* 33.6). Moreover, *Zhongyong* 16 itself refers to a 德 that “embodies” things. This

---

1 While not the comments I presented at the *Zhongyong* panel, this paper is based on those comments and the fruitful discussion that followed the panel.

2 The translation of 德 is much disputed, but since it is not my purpose to resolve such disputes, in the rest of the argument, I will leave controversial terms of this sort untranslated.

3 The passage reads:

（詩）曰： "德繪如毛。" 毛雖有倫。
"上天之載，無聲無臭。" 至矣。

*The Book of Songs* says: "The influence of 德 is as light as a feather."
But even a feather is no comparison.
"The sky/Heaven above goes about its work without using sound or scent."
It is indeed superlative. (*Zhongyong* 33.7)

All translations herein are my own, based on those of Hall and Ames unless otherwise noted.

4 The line reads: 子曰：鬼神之為德，其盛矣乎。...禮物而不可道。
conflicting sensory rhetoric in the Zhongyong is not restricted to the phenomenon of *de*. Indeed, in many places the text seems to describe the proper *dao* and those who employ it as simultaneously hidden and yet broadly displayed, invisible and yet intensely apparent. In other words, the text makes obvious, even strained, attempts to describe a peculiar kind of sensory mode. I will employ Hall and Ames’ concept of “extension” to try to clarify this sensory mode. Hall and Ames discuss extension—what the Zhongyong refers to as *da dao*—in the context of education and ritual. They argue that extending is the method by which one advances in these areas, by creatively drawing upon something already available or understood. I will first support their claim regarding the significance of extension in the text, and then argue that the unusual sensory rhetoric in the Zhongyong is also explainable in terms of this idea of *da dao*, understood as extension.

In their analysis of the Zhongyong’s view of education, Hall and Ames note that extension is a repeated pattern in the text. They point out that, in part, education takes what is already there and draws it out towards other things. For instance, they say that education means building upon “inner tendencies” in order to practice self-cultivation (Ames and Hall, 51). And this phenomenon, they argue, applies to many other features of the text.

Most of the terms invoked to describe Confucian religious experience connote this process of growth and extension explicitly. As we have seen, productive familial relations are the “root (*ben* 本)” whence one’s way (*dao* 道) advances. The repeated contrast between the exemplary person and the petty person, the inclusiveness of appropriateness (*yi* 義) as opposed to the exclusiveness of personal benefit (*li 利*), and the emergence of the authoritative person (*ren* 仁) from individuated persons (*ren* 人) and from the common masses (*min* 民), all entail growth and extension through patterns of deference. Even the term “spirituality” (*shen* 神) crosses the divide between “human spirituality” and “divinity.” Further, *shen* is cognate with the terms “to extend, to prolong (*shen* 伸 and 延).” (Hall and Ames, 50)

Hall and Ames understand extension as an “advancing pathway”—*da dao* 進道. The advancing pathway first appears in Zhongyong 1 in the form of a plant metaphor. The extension in this case is a kind of organic growth—beginning with a small and hidden root and then stretching out in the form

---

5 “It is this sense of education that is captured in the Zhongyong’s expression ‘an advancing pathway (*dadao* 進道)” (Ames and Hall, 51).
of branches. “Equilibrium is the great root of the world; harmony is the branching of the proper way in the world (中也者，天下之大本也。和也者，天下之達道也)” (Zhongyong 1). Beyond plant growth, the text features other metaphors of development, including a geographic extension (in distance and wind) and a kind of perceptual extension that seems to operate in a similar fashion. That is, Zhongyong 33.1 speaks of exemplary persons who “know the nearness of what is distant, know the source of the wind, and know the conspicuousness of what is subtle知遠之近，知風之自，知微之顯” (Zhongyong 33.1). In other words, the exemplary persons know the origin that is near, which is directly connected to the vastness that develops from it. The point of this knowledge of origins and their outcomes is summed up as a principle in Zhongyong 15: one must start somewhere.

Thus, extension refers to the way in which that which is small, hidden, or near at hand connects incrementally with the vast and distant. In terms of the individual’s education, this seems to mean that one must know one’s own person/body in order to know one’s proper dao, since the text points out that the root of the exemplary person’s dao is his/her body: 君子之道 本諸身 (Zhongyong 29). As a result, this principle may explain why the exemplary person’s dao is accessible to even the most unintelligent and immoral person:

The dullest of ordinary men and women can know something of it [the exemplary person’s dao]... The most unworthy of common men and women are able to travel a distance along it....” (Zhongyong 12)

---

6 Although 風 suggests “custom,” as Hall and Ames translate it, the location of a wind’s source underlies this metaphor.

7 As Hall and Ames note, the line evokes Lanyu (Analects) 1.2, where filial relations occupy this role as the root: “Exemplary persons concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold the proper way will grow therefrom. . .” (Ames and Hall, 39).
Presumably, the dull and the unworthy have this small grasp of the dao because even the dao has a source from which it extends, as does distance and the wind. At the same time, since the individual must start with his or her body/self, the extension of knowledge must begin with that individual’s condition, even if it is the condition of dullness and unworthiness. Learning proceeds by extensions of this sort. Thus, as Hall and Ames claim, extension is a common theme in the text with a specific application to education.

Extension is also helpful for understanding the Zhongyong passages that invoke the senses, because they often make the point that the subtle is connected to the great. In explaining that sprouts (or small things) are able to be cheng (sincere/creative), Zhongyong 23 emphasizes increasing levels of perceptibility that link the least to the greatest. Something that starts as small as a sprout, first becomes formed, then becomes manifest—and finally, appears as bright.

Next there is arriving at small things, so that each aspect of them is able to have cheng. When there is cheng, there is form; when there is form, it is manifest; when it is manifest, there is brightness; when there is

\[\text{From these beginnings, one can extend to all possible places, hence the various images of complete coverage. The image of heaven and earth implies such inclusion of everything, as in Zhongyong 30:}\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{辟如天地之無不通蔽，無不覆載。} \\
\text{辟如四時之錯行，如日月之代明。} \\
\text{萬物並育而不相害，道並行而不相悖。}
\end{align*}
\]

He is comparable to the heavens and the earth, sheltering and supporting everything that is. He is comparable to the progress of the four seasons, and the alternating brightness of the sun and moon. All things are nurtured together and do not cause injury to one another; the various ways are traveled together and are not conflicted.

\[\text{Hall and Ames make a case for translating cheng as “creative.”}\]

\[\text{I am using variations on the term “perception” here in a non-technical sense for the sake of simplicity, but as I explain in On the Epistemology of the Sense in Early Chinese Thought, the early Chinese conception of sensory operations does not fit this model.}\]
brightness, there is movement; when there is movement, there is change; when there is change, there is transformation. (Zhongyong 23)

Thus, small things (origins, in this context) are important because they develop in this kind of progression, so that something that starts out small and barely perceptible ends up manifest and bright enough to cause change and transformation. In other words, tiny sprouts have a powerful effect. Indeed, the text implies that even things that strive to avoid being apparent cannot succeed in hiding their effects: the fish that swims to the bottom of the water to conceal itself remains visible despite its efforts.11 In particular, as Zhongyong 33.1 says, that which comes from the exemplary person will make itself felt, even if (or because) it is hidden. (By contrast, things that come from the small person also become manifest, but seem to fade, perhaps precisely because they are shown off.)12

故君子之道，闢然而日章。小人之道，闢然而日亡。

Thus the ways of exemplary persons while hidden, day by day become more conspicuous; the ways of petty persons while obvious, day by day disappear. (Zhongyong 33.1)

The inevitable progression by which small and hidden things become manifest justifies the passage’s subsequent assertion that one should attend to origins (the nearness of the distant etc.). Furthermore, it explains why the text says that when something fortunate or unfortunate is about to occur, it will be given away by perceptible signs—either indicated in the tools of divination or manifest in the movements of the four limbs.13 Finally, it may also explain the claim that, “There is nothing more visible than what is hidden, and nothing more manifest than what is inchoate” (Zhongyong 1). Not that these subtly perceived things are truly the most visible and manifest, but perhaps they are in the sense that worthy things are those that, without displaying themselves, have the most long range effect.

---

11 Zhongyong 33.2 reads: “The Book of Songs says: Although having dived down to lie on the bottom, The fish is still highly visible (詩云：潛雖伏矣，亦孔之昭).”
12 Much of the Zhongyong’s perceptual rhetoric is similar to that of the Laozi, and this same reversal of expectations appears in Laozi 22.
13 See discussion of Zhongyong 24 below.
The *Zhongyong* contains a series of opposing patterns about perception that confirm this concern with the effects of the subtle. On the one hand, the text makes the point that sagely actions that are manifest compel extreme results. On the other hand, it also implies that sagely actions that are not manifest compel equally remarkable results. For example in *Zhongyong* 31, the sage's appearance, speech, and movement are effective in a kind of total sense: "They appear, and all defer to them; they speak, and all have confidence in what they say; they act, and all find pleasure in what they do (見而民莫不敬，言而民莫不信，行而民莫不說)” (*Zhongyong* 31). The passage not only notes that everyone is swayed by these manifestations, it also immediately explains their sensory influence in terms of extension. Because the sage's visible and aural manner is so effective, it says, the sage's name (specifically referred to as a sound) stretches throughout every conceivable location.

Thus we have, on the one hand, the effectiveness of the sage's appearance and speech extending throughout all areas. Yet on the other hand, in cases where there is a kind of "sensory blockage" (in the sense that some sensation is said not to happen), the same total effectiveness ensues. That is, when *Zhongyong* 26 describes utmost cheng 聖 as being "apparent without being seen, changing without moving, and completing without doing (如此者不見而毫不動而變無為而成),” it then proceeds to describe heaven, earth, mountains, and water. The point is that its effect is all-encompassing. The
final passages in the Zhongyong repeats the rhetoric: with neither movement nor speech, there is respect and trust (33.3); with no reward or anger, there is encouragement and awe (33.4); with no manifestation of de, there is imitation (33.5); with neither sounds nor looks, there is transformation (33.6).\footnote{The Laozi 10 (Wang Bi) attributes a similar kind of “blocked” achievement to profound de. “[It] gives birth but does not possess acts but does not depend, helps grow but not rule. This is called profound de (生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德).”} In sum, it is not necessary to show oneself or make a sound in order to achieve the goal of affecting the situation. This is not because the sage (or the exemplary person) uses powers beyond human perception, but because things that appear subtly are intensely effective. It is clear that the effect of the sage is the same whether “blocked” or not, because Zhongyong 33.1 slips from listing pairs of “blocked” sensations to contrasting “blocked” sensations with fulfilled sensations, as if there were no difference. That is, the line begins by saying the exemplary person’s way is delicately flavored and not tiresome,\footnote{The term \textit{dan} 淡 can also be taken as “lightness,” which suggests more of a contrast in weight.} and then adds that it is simple and yet refined, lax and yet regulated (君子之道淡而不厭簡而文温而理). Apparently, it does not matter that this is a switch from making analogous (delicately flavored and not tiresome) claims to juxtaposing opposites (simple and yet refined): in either case the idea is that exemplary person’s manifestation is completely effective. Zhongyong 16 (discussed below) makes a similar point that something exceedingly subtle has an exceedingly far ranging effect: the \textit{de} of ghosts and spirits is not seen or heard, but they appear to be everywhere. Hence the passage notes, “Such is the way that the inchoate becomes manifest and cheng is irrepresible.” The astonishing result comes from extension: from things so subtle as to be almost not manifest.

It is important to clarify that extension in the Zhongyong does not always refer to moving further. In certain circumstances, it can be a critique of moving \textit{on} in favor of moving \textit{into}—a point that is made in another reference to perception in the text. A number of passages in the Zhongyong show the drawbacks of pushing too far. Things are limitless: one cannot reach the end of the \textit{dao} any more than one can reach the end of heaven and earth. Even the sage cannot know or do everything.

君子之道淡而簡。
夫婦之愚可以與知焉；

\textit{dan} 淡, which in Chinese, means “lightweight” or “lightness,” is used to describe something that is not heavy or that is easily handled. In Chinese culture, lightness or simplicity is often associated with wisdom and virtue. The term is also used to describe the lack of involvement or interference. In the context of the Zhongyong, it suggests that the sage’s manifestation is delicate and not tiresome, simple and yet refined, and lax and yet regulated. This lightness or subtlety is effective, as the passage notes, because it is not merely seen or heard, but appears everywhere. The passage concludes by emphasizing that things so subtle are almost not manifest, and thus the sage’s effect is complete.
The proper way of exemplary persons is both broad and hidden. The dullest of ordinary men and women can know something of it, and yet even the sages do not know it all. The most unworthy of common men and women are able to travel a distance along it, yet even the sages are not able to travel it all. As grand as the world is, people are still never completely satisfied. (Zhongyong 12)

This is why sometimes the text describes a person as knowledgeable and virtuous and yet no better off than one who is ignorant or lacking virtue.

The Master said, “I know why this proper way is not traveled: The wise stray beyond it while the simple-minded cannot reach it. I know why this proper way is not evident: Those of superior character stray beyond it while those who are unworthy cannot reach it. Everyone eats and drinks, but those who know taste are rare.” (Zhongyong 4)

The perceptual metaphor is revealing: the way does not necessarily involve extending toward extremes. As with knowing the taste of what one eats and drinks, it is more a matter of paying attention to what is right there than pressing forward. Given the significance of yang in the title of the work, this may reflect the importance of being attuned to the ordinary. But being more attuned to the immediately present is also a kind of extension: that is, extending one’s awareness to what has been taken for granted.

This notion of extending sensations also seems to factor in the text’s puzzling references to de. It is fair to say that de is something that can be manifest, if sometimes only tenuously. This is evident because Zhongyong 33.5 speaks of de not being manifest in a way that implies it has the potential to be.

The Book of Songs says: “Without manifesting his de, the various vassals model themselves after him.” It is for this reason that exemplary
The Limits of the Senses in the Zhongyong

persons are earnest and reverential and the world is at peace. (Zhongyong 33.5)

Moreover, the passage from the Book of Songs cited in Zhongyong 26 exclaims over the manifestation of King Wen’s de. Indeed, de can even be described as “bright.” There is an implicit contrast between being covertly “bright” and expressing “great” noise or visual appearance—a contrast in which subtlety (keep this “brightness” close to the chest) can transform others more effectively than more obvious methods (obvious speech and looks).

《詩》云：“子懷明德，不聲以色。”
子曰：“聲色之於以化民，末也。”

The Book of Songs says: “Harboring the highest de in your breast, you have no need of loud speech or looks.” The Master said, “Speech and looks are of little use in transforming the common people.” 17 (Zhongyong 33.6)

Clearly, this subtlety of de is not a deficiency. In light of this, it seems the two types of de in Zhongyong 30 should not be read as expressing the inferiority of small de:

萬物並育而不相害，
道並行而不相悖，
小德流，大德載化，
此天地之所以為大也。

All things are nurtured together and do not cause injury to one another; the various ways are traveled together and are not conflicted. Little de flows in streams; great de massively transforms. This is why the heavens and the earth are so great. (Zhongyong 30)

If there is any contrast between these types here, it is perhaps that flowing in streams leads to the massive transformations of large de. Thus, even smaller de leads to larger effects. Moreover, as the use of “bright” vs. “great” in Zhongyong 33.6 shows, de may not be obvious, but it is not imperceptible.

17 This does not mean they cannot know the dao. Zhongyong 12 asserts that even the dullest of people can. But expressiveness on the part of exemplary persons is not necessary for this to occur.
In fact, in the Zhongyong, de seems to be accessible by extending one’s powers and hearing and sight. Truly acute ears and eyes (congming 聰明) can extend to the point of reaching heavenly de. According to Zhongyong 32, Only those whose own capacities of hearing, seeing, and sagely knowledge extend to the de of tian could possibly understand them [the threads of the great loom of the world] (茲固聰明聖知遂天德者其孰能知之)” (Zhongyong 32). Thus the confusion produced by Zhongyong 33.7 speaking of de without smell or sound, and by Zhongyong 16 speaking of a de that is not seen or heard, can be resolved in terms of this notion of extension. In other words, in one sense we might say that everyone perceives de, since it affects everyone, but strictly speaking de is only perceived by those whose senses are finely attuned to its subtle workings.18

This notion that de requires finely tuned senses helps explain the Zhongyong 16 assertion that the de of ghosts and spirits (guishen 鬼神) is not seen or heard:

子曰：“鬼神之為禮其盛矣乎！
誦之而弗見，聽之而弗聞，飲食而不可遺。
使天下之人，齊明盛服以承祭祀，
洋洋乎如在其上，如在其左右。
《詩》曰：‘神之格思，不可度思，矧可射思！’
夫微之顯，誠之不可掩如此夫！

The Master said, “The de of the gods and spirits is profound. Looking, we do not see it; listening, we do not hear it. And yet it embodies things/events to the extent that nothing can be what it is without it. It causes the people of the world to fast, purify themselves, and put on their finest clothes in carrying out the sacrifices [to the ghosts and spirits]. It is as though the air above our heads is suffused with them, and as though they are all around. The Book of Songs says: ‘The descent of the spirits cannot be fathomed—how much less can it be ignored.’ Such is the way that the inchoate becomes manifest and cheng is irrepressible.”

18 Shigehisa Kuriyama makes a similar point about early Chinese medical practices. He notes that the Lunyu 12/20 reference to de 達 involves sensitivity to tone and voice, which, he argues, is indicative of how early Chinese medicine specifically aimed at spotting the slightest changes in the color (se 色) of a patient’s face that serve as a hint of more severe impending changes in the form (xing 形). See Kuriyama, 181.

19 The line is almost identical to Laozi 14 (Wang Bi edition), which concerns something whose beginning (head) and end (rear) cannot be found: “Looking at it but not seeing, name it level. Listening to it but not hearing, name it rare 睹之不見名曰夷，聽之不聞名曰希.”
Although this describes de as unheard and unseen, in a variety of ways the passage emphasizes its sensible manifestations. The passage notes that de embodies things/events. It also seems to elaborate on this by adding that de causes people to perform physical acts of making bodies clear (ming 明) and clothing ample (sheng 盛)—in other words, this is perhaps the means by which de embodies. Furthermore, the final line explicitly asserts that the subtle is manifest, noting that it cannot be “covered” (yan 掩). Hence, something too small for ordinary sight or hearing to sense is accessible to those whose senses are attuned to the way subtle things are the hidden roots of vast things.

It is significant that the passage concerns ghosts and spirits, because ghosts and spirits share with de the characteristic of being effective in an exceptionally subtle way. In the early Chinese worldview, ghosts and spirits are audible and visible. As the Mozi notes,

生民以來者，亦有曾見鬼神之物，聞鬼神之聲，則鬼神何譏無乎！

If...since the beginning of humanity, there are also those who have seen events of ghosts and spirits, and heard the voices of ghosts and spirits, how can they be called "not there"? (Mozi 31/12-13)

It seems that ghosts and spirits can also be sensed in the Zhongyong, but the sensations are subtle, since the comment about shen/spirits in Zhongyong claims that foreknowledge is possible with the ability to sense subtle signs (i.e. the turtle plastrons and the four limbs).

至誠之道可以前知。
國家將興必有禎祥；
國家將亡必有妖孽。
見乎蓍龜，動乎四體。
禍福將至，善，必先知之，
不善，必先知之。
故至誠如神。

20 There are references to de in the Zhongyong that are not necessarily related to ghosts and spirits—small and big de [Zhongyong 30], ordinary de [Zhongyong 13], bright de [Zhongyong 33.6], and heavenly de [Zhongyong 32]—although the last of these might amount to the same thing as the de of ghosts and spirits.

21 The Xunzi’s contrary position—that ghosts and spirits do not exist—does not doubt that they can be seen and heard, it doubts that they exist at all (Xunzi 21/76).
The dao of utmost cheng is capable of knowing things in advance. When the state and family are about to flourish, there are auspicious omens and signs; when they are about to perish, there are ominous portents and auguries. These will be manifest in the milfoil and turtle plastron divinations and will affect the movements of the four limbs. When a change in fortune is about to happen, either for good or for bad, it is bound to be known in advance. Thus utmost cheng is like shen.

Foreknowledge seems to be possible for those who can read signs because all things manifest themselves in advance, if only obscurely. The passage seems to say that utmost cheng means being able to interpret the faint signs by which things make themselves known. Moreover, foreknowledge is linked to shen, presumably either because spirits also know how to sense subtle things in advance or because spirits are things that subtly make themselves known (sensed) in advance. On either reading, shen has something to do with the tendency of the subtle to make itself manifest. In other words, while everything may be said to have hidden roots—from the world itself (Zhongyong 1) to ignorant people (Zhongyong 12)—this seems particularly characteristic of shen and de, which seem to operate on an exceptionally refined level.²²

²² If extending the subtle explains the idea that de is not seen or heard in Zhongyong 16, something else from Hall and Ames’ work on the Zhongyong can help to explain the Zhongyong 33.1 comment that one can “enter” de.

《詩》曰：‘衣錦而網。” 惡其文之著也。
故君子之道闡然而日章，
小人之道從然而日亡。
君子之道淡而不厭，
簡而文，溫而理，
知遠之近，知微之白，知微之顯，
可與入德矣。

The Book of Songs says: “Over her brocade skirts she wears a plain robe.” This means she hates to make a display of her refinement. Thus the ways of exemplary persons while hidden, day by day become more conspicuous; the ways of petty persons while obvious, day by day disappear. The ways of exemplary persons are plain and not wearisome, simple and refined, amicable and coherent. Those who know the nearness of what is distant, the source of what is customary, and the conspicuousness of what is subtle—such persons can enter de. (Zhongyong 33.1)

Generally the Zhongyong descriptions of de point to something we might want to call small, since it is said to be subtle and it contrasts with great. But as Hall and Ames note, there is a
This notion of barely sensed things that extend to produce exceptionally powerful consequences seems relevant for interpreting the text's use of the expression *shen qi du* 慎其獨. As Hall and Ames explain, there is a tradition of interpreting the phrase as if it refers to being careful of one's “uniqueness.” Alternatively, the term *du* might refer to solitude—a reading that seems more in accord with the perceptual patterns in the *Zhongyong*. The phrase occurs in *Zhongyong* 1, immediately following a statement about being careful of what is not heard and seen:

是故君子戒慎其所不睹，恐惧乎其所不聞。
是見乎隱，莫顯乎微，故君子慎其獨也。

It is for this reason that the exemplary persons are so concerned about what is not seen, and so anxious about what is not heard. There is nothing more visible than what is hidden, and nothing more manifest than what is inchoate. Thus, exemplary persons are ever careful of their solitude. (*Zhongyong* 1)

The reference to what is not seen or heard may have some bearing on the phrase’s meaning, since a similar connection appears in the use of the phrase in both the *Xunzi* and the *Daxue*. The *Xunzi* passage reads:

君子至德而喻，未施而親，不怒而威。
夫此順命以慎其獨者也。善之為道者，
不獨則不獨，不獨則不形，不形則難作放心，
見於色，出於言，民爭若未從也。雖從必疑。

...when the gentleman has attained to perfect *de*, though he remains silent, he is understood, though he has never bestowed any favor, he is considered affectionate; and though he does not display anger, he pos-

---

default assumption in classical Western traditions that “things” are discrete substances (Ames and Hall, 52). Viewing something subtle as a small discrete thing would reflect that assumption. Hall and Ames suggest that “things” in the early Chinese context are events. They say, “…the ‘things’ are not discrete objects but are themselves states of being; they are *happenings*. Thus the locution, ‘the ten thousand things’, must be glossed as ‘the ten thousand *processes or events*’” (emphasis in original, Ames and Hall, 11). Hence, in terms of sensing, we might speak of audible events, visible events etc. If we consider that small *de* flows and that great *de* changes, then it does seem more plausible to think of *de* as an event. Moreover, ordinary *de* is something that can be walked (庸德之行, *Zhongyong* 13). And if *de* is an event, then it seems less odd to speak of “entering” it, as we might enter a flowing stream or a massive process.

23 This is the reading Hall and Ames endorse. See Ames and Hall, 118–119.
senses an awe-inspiring dignity. This is following his destiny by means of being careful of his solitude. Though a person is adept at acting in accord with the Way, if he lacks sheng, he will not be solitary. Not being solitary, he will not take form. Not taking form, though he creates [something] in his mind, displays it on his face, and expresses it in speech, the common people will nonetheless never follow him, and insofar as they must, it will be with suspicion. (Xunji 3/30)

In light of the Confucian emphasis on relational personhood, it might seem implausible to interpret du as solitude, but the Zhongyong does discuss worthyies being secluded and hidden. As Zhongyong 12 notes, “the proper way of exemplary persons is both broad and hidden (君子之道費而隐), and this is repeated in the Zhongyong 33.1 idea that the hidden ways of the exemplary become increasingly manifest. In a minor form, this occurs when exemplary persons restrain their spoken expression because the dao does not prevail:

國有道，其言足以興；
國無道，其默足以容。
（詩）曰：‘既明且哲，以保其身，' 其此之謂與！

When the proper way prevails in the world, their words will enable them to flourish; when it does not, their silence will win the forbearance. The Book of Songs says: “Enlightened, and also wise—Thus he guards his person.” Is this not what this passage means? (Zhongyong 27)

But in a more extreme example, without even specifying conditions, Zhongyong 11 describes the sage as one who is able to live unseen, withdrawn from the world. “[Those] who withdraw from the world to live out their lives in obscurity without the least regret—only the sages are able to do this (遁世不見知而不悔，唯聖者能之)” (Zhongyong 11). Thus the text has good reason to explain how one should behave when alone: such circumstances are not unexpected in the life of the exemplary person. Furthermore, the use of the same phrase in the Daxue is accompanied by an illustration that indicates solitude is at issue at least in this context:

所謂誠其意者，毋自欺也。

24 The line is quite similar to Zhongyong 33.4: “It is for this reason that exemplary persons offer no reward and yet have the best efforts of the common people, show no anger and yet the people stand in awe of their symbols of sovereignty 君子不貴而民勤，不怒而民威於銘銘。”

What is meant by “making the thoughts sincere” is allowing no self-deception, as when we hate hateful smells, and love lovely sights. This is called self-enjoyment. Therefore, superior persons must be careful of their solitude. There is no bad thing to which petty persons, dwelling retired, will not proceed, but when they see a superior person, they instantly try to disguise it, concealing their bad and displaying their good. The other looks at them, practically seeing into their lungs and liver—so what is the point? This is an instance of the saying—"What is genuinely within will be manifest without.” Therefore, superior persons must be careful of their solitude.26

*Du* here refers to occasions when one is not observed by others. The fact that *Zhongyong* 1 includes references to things unseen and unheard makes it seem related to this point (also raised in the *Xunzi* passage) that nothing can be truly hidden. In contrast to the small person who acts badly (為不善) and expects to be able to hide it, the exemplary person knows that the effect of an action (為) proceeds inevitably. The effect does not depend upon there being someone in the immediate vicinity to feel it, because it is possible that the action will affect the person in ways that will only be apparent later. Nor does it necessarily depend upon being expressed in one’s voice or face. That is, as *Zhongyong* 33.6 says, “Speech and looks are of little use in transforming the common people.” This could be taken to mean that certain actions betray themselves in one’s face and voice only to those who are exceptionally perceptive (as *Zhongyong* 32 suggests in reference to the perception of *de*). Or it might mean that certain actions—if not seen or heard—may be sensed through a sort of general feeling in the perceiver’s body.27 But either

---


27 As I argue in Chapter One of *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early China*, the body itself sometimes functions as one of the “five senses” and what it senses has to do with comfortable or uncomfortable environments.
interpretation explains why one must be careful when one is alone. Even when no one is present, we are never truly alone in the sense of being isolated from affecting our environment. Moreover, we can only “extend” from wherever we happen to be, which is wherever our actions (taken alone or in the presence of others) place us.

References to things not seen, not heard, and not moving can easily mislead an audience accustomed to thinking in terms of human perception as inherently flawed and limited in its capacity to perceive a “real world” that exists beyond it. But in each case, these apparent references to sensory failure never appear without concomitant hints of sensory “success,” in the sense that things unseen and unheard are also visible (in Zhongyong 16) and things that do not move are also somehow able to change (in Zhongyong 26). If these things were beyond perception, we might expect the text to say that each different sensory capacity fails to grasp them—i.e. something like an assertion that they systematically fail to be seen, heard, tasted, touched, and smelled. Yet there is no inclusive list of sensory failures of this sort. The final lines in the Zhongyong that compare de to a hair may expressly rule out its having smell or sound, but we are left with the possibility that de is as subtly visible or light as a hair—a possibility that, in fact, the analogy makes more probable. The pattern of extension in the text helps explain such comments about perception. It also clarifies that the discussion of ghosts and spirits does not hint at something beyond human sensation, but rather something only perceived by those who are able to extend their skills in sensing. The reason for the claim in Zhongyong 1 that the unseen and unheard are uncommonly manifest is that even the barest hint of an action—one that is easily overlooked—has extraordinary consequences. And sensory “blockages”—things unseen or unheard—are characteristic of exemplary persons, who are the very persons most adept at sensing subtle things and creating remarkable effects. Thus, Hall and Ames’ concept of extension “extends,” so to speak, to explain other things. What they apply to context of education and ritual also applies to these perceptual puzzles.

REFERENCES


