

Evil Nature and the Foolish Crowd: A Comparative Study of the Theory of Evil Human Nature and The Crowd

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Abstract

Both Xunzi's "theory of evil human nature" and Gustave Le Bon's The Crowd reveal the irrational traits within human nature and their impact on social order. From the perspective of Confucian ethical philosophy, Xunzi advocates for achieving "transforming nature and initiating deliberate effort" (huaxing qiwei) through the cultivation of ritual and righteousness. From the standpoint of group psychology, Le Bon emphasizes the role of leader suggestion and group emotion. Both adopt a pessimistic premise regarding human nature and rely on external intervention. However, Xunzi focuses on individual moral cultivation, while Le Bon emphasizes group psychological mechanisms. This contrast offers a new interdisciplinary perspective for understanding human nature and group behavior, while also expanding the scope for modern interpretations of Xunzi's ethical philosophy.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the exploration of human thought, the negative potential of individual and group behavior has long been a significant subject. Xunzi's "theory of evil human nature" (xing'e lun) and Gustave Le Bon's theory of "the crowd," though separated by millennia and distinct disciplinary backgrounds, both keenly capture the negative traits in human behavior and their potential threat to social order. Xunzi points out that if an individual's innate natural desires are left unchecked, they will lead to negative consequences such as contention, cruelty, and licentiousness, ultimately resulting in social disorder. Le Bon, focusing on group psychology, argues that individuals, upon merging into a crowd, form a homogeneous, emotional, suggestible, and irrational psychological entity characterized by diminished intelligence and

moral ambiguity—that is, collective folly. Although separated by vast spans of time and space and belonging to different disciplines, both share a concern for the risk of "disorder." This prompts a core question: Xunzi's concept of "evil" originates from the unchecked innate natural desires of the individual, while Le Bon's "foolish crowd" results from irrational behavior driven by group psychology. Do these two negative traits share similar generative mechanisms? How do they manifest in society, and what impact do they have on social order? In confronting these negative traits, what are the essential differences and inherent connections between Xunzi's proposed "transforming nature and initiating deliberate effort" (huaxing qiwei) and Le Bon's "leader guidance"? To explore these questions in depth, this paper undertakes a parallel comparison of

the phenomenon of "evil/folly" and the schemes for overcoming it, analyzing them across three dimensions: the essential definition and premises regarding human nature/the group; the generative logic and social manifestations; and the core schemes for overcoming/guidance. Through this systematic comparison, the aim is to reveal the similarities and differences in their core concerns and to understand their value and significance. Such comparative research not only aids in better comprehending the negative potential in human behavior but also provides new perspectives and reflections for addressing social disorder.

II. THE PREMISES OF INNATELY EVIL NATURE AND INNATELY FOOLISH CROWD

Before discussing the concepts of "evil" and "folly" in the theories of Xunzi and Le Bon, it is necessary to first clarify what exactly these negative traits refer to and upon what premises these definitions are based. Therefore, we must first concentrate on analyzing Xunzi's "theory of evil human nature," examining how he defines "evil" and the premises underlying it. Xunzi's theory is fundamentally a judgment in moral philosophy. He defines "evil" as the social disorder (e.g., "contention," "chaos," "violence") and moral decay (e.g., "deviance, transgression, and chaos") that result when individual behavior indulges natural desires such as the love of profit, envy, and the desires of the senses. Xunzi's description of "evil" resembles a concern for the "Broken Window Theory"[1], which posits that "if minor signs of disorder or deviant behavior are not promptly repaired and stopped, the scope and consequences of the 'broken window' will gradually spread, eventually developing into criminal behavior." Given that Xunzi believes the root of "evil" lies in the individual's innate "nature" (xing), curbing the emergence of evil fundamentally rests on limiting the boundlessness and irrationality of natural desires, thereby allowing individuals the space to learn goodness postnatally. From this, it is evident that the theory of evil human nature denies virtue as an innate human endowment and asserts that virtue is formed through the postnatal process of transforming

nature[2]. The foundation of Xunzi's theory is the "distinction between nature and deliberate effort" (xingwei zhi fen). He strictly differentiates between innate, natural, conflict-prone "nature" (xing) and postnatal, artificial, order-oriented "deliberate effort" (wei), i.e., ritual and moral cultivation. This is because he believes that ritual and righteousness constitute "the main content of the inner virtue of the ideal personality"[2]. "Human nature is evil; goodness is the result of deliberate effort (wei). The nature of present-day man is such that from birth he has a love of profit. Following this leads to contention and strife, and courtesy and deference perish"[3] (Xing'e). In Xunzi's view, human nature is inherently evil. If individual natural desires are not restrained, they inevitably lead to social chaos and moral corruption. Therefore, goodness and order are not intrinsic to human nature but are entirely dependent on postnatal, artificial construction. The sages, through establishing teachings such as rituals and music, guide people to restrain their natural desires, thereby establishing social order.

In contrast, Le Bon defines "folly" as a socio-psychological phenomenon manifested by diminished intelligence, irrational behavior, emotionalism, extreme suggestibility, bigotry, and ambiguous or extreme moral standards when an individual becomes part of a crowd. This "folly" is not a trait of the individual in isolation but a unique product of the group environment. According to Le Bon, "The moment individuals become part of a crowd, their former personality disappears. They cease to think independently, but go along with the crowd; the unconscious gains the upper hand, intellectual capacity diminishes, and it becomes difficult to make sensible decisions"[4]. One of Le Bon's core premises is the discontinuity between individual psychology and group psychology. He posits that group psychology is a distinct entity governed by the "law of the mental unity of crowds"[5], fundamentally different from the psychological state of an individual alone. Once submerged in a crowd, an individual's mental state undergoes a radical change; the group's characteristics rapidly "infect" the individual, altering their behavioral patterns. Furthermore, Le Bon presupposes

that the crowd itself possesses a natural, powerful tendency towards irrationality, low intelligence, and susceptibility to manipulation. Individuals, upon merging with the crowd, are "stupefied" by these characteristics and lose the capacity for independent thought. Group behavior is primarily driven by powerful, irrational unconscious forces; rational thought is severely weakened, even completely annihilated in this environment. This unconscious-driven group behavior makes the crowd extremely rapid in the spread of emotions and ideas, and highly susceptible to external stimuli. Le Bon's premises offer a unique lens for understanding "folly" in group behavior and reveal the complexity and fragility of human nature within the group setting.

Having dissected Xunzi's "theory of evil human nature" and Le Bon's theory of The Crowd, a comparison of their underlying premises and definitions of "evil" and "folly" is warranted. Their similarity lies in a shared critical and vigilant attitude towards a certain "state of nature." Xunzi critiques the natural desires inherent in the individual's innate nature, while Le Bon warns against the group psychological state formed when individuals merge into a crowd. Both believe this "state of nature" harbors negative tendencies—"evil" in Xunzi's view, "folly" in Le Bon's—and both emphasize the necessity of external intervention for restraint and guidance. However, fundamental differences exist regarding the focal carrier, the attribution of origin, the nature of the definition, and the source of order or rationality. Xunzi's focus is on the "nature" (xing) inherent in the individual. He posits that the root of "evil" resides within each individual's nature, a malignant tendency present even when alone. Le Bon's focus is the group's psychological state. He argues that "folly" is primarily manifested within the group context; an individual alone may be relatively rational—"Alone, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he becomes a barbarian, acting on instinct"[6]. Xunzi's definition of "evil" is a moral-ethical evaluation, concerned with the destructive impact of individual behavior on social order and moral norms. Le Bon's definition of "folly" is a description of psychological traits, focusing on the

characteristics of the group's cognitive and behavioral patterns. Regarding the source of order and rationality, Xunzi insists that order relies entirely on postnatal, artificial construction—"there must be the transforming influence of teachers and laws, the guidance of ritual and righteousness"[7] to rectify evil nature (Xing'e). Le Bon acknowledges the existence of individual rationality but contends that it is suppressed within the crowd, where group behavior is primarily driven by unconscious forces—"It can provide the passion needed for revolution, but may also lead to violent and socially destructive acts"[8]. These differences reflect not only the distinct disciplinary backgrounds and research perspectives but also enrich the dimensions through which we can contemplate the negative potential within human behavior.

III. THE EXPANSION OF EVIL DESIRE AND THE CONTAGION OF FOOLISH CONDUCT

In exploring the generative mechanisms and social manifestations of "evil" and "folly," we must first delve deeply into the logic of "evil's" generation as described by Xunzi and its concrete expressions in society. Xunzi argues that "evil" arises from the individual's internal natural desires, which are survival-based tendencies to seek benefit and avoid harm. Individuals are born with a love of profit, an aversion to evil, and a craving for sensory pleasures. If these natural desires expand unchecked, they trigger a cascade of negative consequences. When individuals follow their natural disposition and indulge their desires, conflict between desires is inevitable. To satisfy their own wants, people will contend for limited resources, a contention that ultimately escalates into social chaos and violence. Xunzi points out that this behavioral pattern, stemming from natural instinct, if unrestrained, will inevitably "originate in contention, coincide with transgression and the disruption of order, and culminate in violence"[7], leading to the collapse of social order and moral decay (Xing'e). However, the individual innately lacks an effective internal mechanism of moral-rational constraint; such constraint must be acquired through postnatal learning and cultivation.

According to Xunzi, "The key to order and chaos lies in the mind, not in the desires. If, in seeking the Way of governance, one seeks to control desires without seeking to understand the mind, one will surely fail"[9]. Thus, Xunzi emphasizes the necessity of cultivation through "ritual and righteousness" (liyi) and the development of the cognitive and discerning function of the "mind" (xin). At the societal level, the manifestation of "evil" is macroscopic social disorder, characterized by widespread contention, harm, chaos, and resource scarcity. At the individual behavioral level, it appears as greed, envy, conflict, usurpation of rank, and the violation of ritual and legal norms. These actions not only disrupt social harmony and stability but also plunge individuals into endless strife and suffering.

Turning to Le Bon's theory of *The Crowd*, the generative mechanism of "folly" follows a distinctly different path. Le Bon posits that "folly" arises from the release, mutual contagion, and resonance of unconscious forces within the group environment. "According to Le Bon, the behavior of crowds is entirely unconscious; they obey only the impulses they receive, are often influenced by external stimuli and momentary passions, experience volatile emotions, and lack enduring thoughts or desires"[4]. Individuals in a crowd are highly suggestible; stimuli from leaders or the environment are rapidly accepted and translated into action, while critical faculty is almost entirely lost. Finally, individuality is submerged, the rational conscious personality is suppressed, and primitive instinctual drives dominate group behavior. The point of failure in this generative mechanism is that the individual's postnatally acquired rational capacity is temporarily suppressed and overwhelmed within the group psychological field. The individual in the crowd no longer exists as an independent rational thinker but becomes part of the collective group mind. The crowd's behavior is typically irrational and low in intelligence: diminished intellect, credulity towards simple assertions and images, lack of reasoning ability; emotionality and impulsiveness, easily incited, with changeable and reckless actions; bigotry and authoritarianism, forming simplistic absolute

beliefs and rejecting dissent; moral polarization, capable of both extreme "nobility" and extreme cruelty. This complexity and variability make crowd "folly" a highly influential and unpredictable social phenomenon. Having analyzed the generative mechanisms and social manifestations of "evil" and "folly" in Xunzi's and Le Bon's theories, we can identify certain similarities. For instance, both reveal that negative states result from certain internal drives spiraling out of control in the absence of effective external constraints (internal moral reason for Xunzi, individual rational capacity for Le Bon), and both can lead to destructive social consequences. This suggests that whether it is individual natural desire or unconscious force within the crowd, without proper restraint, it can severely threaten social order.

Nevertheless, fundamental differences exist in other aspects. Xunzi views the driving force of "evil" as an internal, consciously directed desire rooted in survival instinct, possessing a degree of instrumental rationality: "That humans desire to be good is because their nature is evil"[10] (Xing'e). To satisfy self-interest, individuals will resort to any means to compete for resources, thereby inciting social chaos. Le Bon, conversely, sees the driving force of "folly" as the eruption and collective resonance of unconscious forces within the group field, possessing a strong irrational character: "The crowd is always hovering on the edge of unconsciousness, easily influenced by suggestion, like persons devoid of reason, emotionally crude, lacking critical spirit, and only capable of extreme credulity"[11]. Within the crowd, unconscious forces among individuals inter-contaminate and resonate, forming a powerful collective psyche that renders group behavior blind and impulsive. Xunzi points out the individual's innate lack of moral reason, which requires postnatal construction through education and learning. Le Bon, however, emphasizes that the individual's postnatally developed rational faculty is suppressed within the specific group environment, leading to the irrationalization of group behavior. Xunzi focuses on the macro-level collapse of social order—"chaos" (luan)—resulting from the aggregation of individual actions. He stresses that unchecked individual

evil will ultimately lead to societal upheaval. Le Bon focuses on the specific irrational behavioral patterns exhibited by the crowd itself, such as credulity, impulsiveness, and bigotry. These patterns facilitate the rapid spread of emotions and ideas within the crowd, making it easily swayed by external stimuli. The evil acts described by Xunzi are often driven by the satisfaction of selfish desires and possess clear purposiveness; individuals contemplate their desires and act to fulfill them. The foolish acts described by Le Bon are often driven by belief or emotion, exhibiting greater blindness; individuals in a crowd, swayed by emotion, often follow group actions unthinkingly, sometimes even acting against their own interests.

IV. TRANSFORMING NATURE AND INITIATING DELIBERATE EFFORT VERSUS LEADER MANIPULATION

In addressing how to manage the negative potential in human behavior, Xunzi proposes a unique transformative approach: "transforming nature and initiating deliberate effort" (huaxing qiwei). The core of this concept lies in reforming the individual's innate evil nature through postnatal artificial effort, thereby achieving harmony between the individual and society. Xunzi argues that achieving this goal first requires constructing an external normative system. Sages establish "ritual, righteousness, laws, and standards" (liyi fadu); these norms become the bedrock of society, providing clear guidelines for behavior. However, external norms alone are insufficient; they must be internalized as individual virtue through "the transforming influence of teachers and laws" (shifa zhi hua) and the "accumulation of deliberate effort" (jiwei). Education and learning are crucial in this process; through sustained study and practice, the individual gradually transforms external ritual norms into inner moral consciousness. In this process, the role of the "mind" (xin) is paramount. The individual must utilize the mind's cognitive and discerning capacity—such as "emptiness, unity, and stillness" (xuyi er jing) and "understanding the Way" (zhidao)—to learn, comprehend, and willingly adhere to ritual principles[12] (Jiebi).

This process of cognition and understanding not only enables conscious compliance with external norms but also achieves the transformation of one's own nature, i.e., "transforming nature" (huaxing). Through this method, the individual's moral character undergoes a fundamental conversion, reaching the state of "completing virtue" (chengde). Xunzi's ultimate goal is to achieve the unity of individual and societal good through the transformation of individuals. He pursues a form of moral idealism, hoping to establish and maintain a stable, harmonious social order—the ideal state of "living together in harmony" (qunju heyi) and "order" (zhi)—through individual moral cultivation[13] (Rongru). This path, targeting the individual, emphasizes shaping society by transforming individuals, reflecting Xunzi's profound insight into human nature and his deep concern for social order.

In examining how to manage the "folly" inherent in group behavior, Le Bon proposes a distinct art of governance—"leader guidance." The core of this concept lies in understanding and utilizing the laws of group psychology to steer crowd behavior through the manipulation of a strong leader. Le Bon posits that for a leader to effectively guide a crowd, they must possess certain essential traits. First, the leader must have strong convictions, or at least skillfully feign them. Second, the leader must possess an iron will capable of establishing authority over the crowd. Furthermore, exceptional prestige and charisma are indispensable, allowing the leader to swiftly gain recognition and followers within the group. Regarding specific manipulative techniques, Le Bon emphasizes three clear methods: "affirmation, repetition, and contagion"[14]. The first is affirmation—a concise, forceful indoctrination of ideas without supporting argument. Through affirmation, the leader rapidly implants core ideas into the group's consciousness. Next is repetition; by constantly reiterating these affirmations, they become deeply ingrained, etched into the group's collective memory. Contagion is another vital tool; through emotional resonance and the power of example, the spread of ideas within the group is accelerated. Simultaneously, the leader appeals to emotion and imagery, stimulating the

crowd's imagination and susceptibility while avoiding rational argument, as the group in this state is more easily swayed by emotion and vivid pictures. Notably, these manipulative methods are not aimed at enhancing individual rational capacity but directly target the group psychological field. Le Bon's objective is to guide or manipulate crowd power to serve specific ends, ends that are themselves morally neutral. The core focus is controlling the direction and intensity of group behavior, reflecting a mindset of pragmatic utilitarianism and instrumental rationality. Le Bon's art of governance acts upon the group psyche as a whole, rather than upon the individual. By understanding the laws of group psychology, a leader can effectively steer crowd behavior toward a desired outcome.

When comparing Xunzi's "transforming nature and initiating deliberate effort" with Le Bon's "leader guidance" as solutions, we find both similarities and fundamental differences. The similarity lies in the shared acknowledgment that external authoritative force and specific norms or methods are necessary for intervention. Xunzi relies on "ritual and righteousness" established by sages, implemented through education and practice to transform individuals. Le Bon relies on leaders with strong convictions and charisma, utilizing techniques like affirmation, repetition, and contagion to manipulate crowds. This indicates that whether it involves individual moral reform or group behavioral guidance, some external force or method is required. However, their ultimate goals differ significantly. Xunzi pursues moral idealism, aiming to achieve individual virtue and societal goodness—i.e., "goodness" (shan) and "order" (zhi)—through the transformation of individual moral character. He emphasizes rational cultivation and inner moral identification to foster voluntary adherence to social norms, thereby constructing a harmonious and stable social order. This path relies on the individual's capacity for learning and long-term cultivation; it is a constructive process aimed at fundamentally transforming innate nature. In contrast, Le Bon's goal reflects pragmatic utilitarianism and instrumental rationality. His aim is to achieve specific objectives through leader guidance, objectives devoid of inherent universal morality. Le Bon's

method involves non-rational psychological manipulation, exploiting the crowd's weaknesses—such as suggestibility and emotionality—for external guidance and control. This path is reactive, focused on directly harnessing the crowd rather than transforming individuals. Xunzi emphasizes that transforming the individual is the fundamental approach, achieving moral elevation through "transforming nature" (huaxing). Le Bon directly addresses the steering of group behavior, manipulating the group psyche to achieve goals. Regarding the definition of "goodness" or success, Xunzi's "goodness" has clear moral content: conformity to ritual and righteousness, beneficial for group harmony. Le Bon defines "success" as achieving the goal, independent of universal morality. In their attitude toward individual reason, Xunzi relies on and seeks to enhance individual rational cognition and moral judgment, seeing this as key to moral transformation. Le Bon, conversely, circumvents or even suppresses individual reason within the group, as rational thought would undermine the crowd's susceptibility to manipulation.

V. CONCLUSION

Having deeply explored Xunzi's "theory of evil human nature" and Le Bon's *The Crowd*, we arrive at the core conclusion: From the perspective of moral philosophy, Xunzi posits that the evil of individual nature stems from the unchecked expansion of natural desires, and its remedy lies in postnatal cultivation and internalization to achieve "transforming nature and initiating deliberate effort." From the perspective of social psychology, Le Bon posits that the folly of the group state arises from unconscious contagion and resonance, and its remedy lies in the manipulation and guidance provided by a leader to effectively harness the crowd. Both thinkers possess profound insight into the darker aspects of humanity and groups, yet their foundational premises, problem definitions, and proposed solutions differ fundamentally. This contrast not only highlights the distinct approaches of Eastern and Western thought in addressing the risks inherent in human nature and group dynamics but also deepens our understanding of perennial issues

such as "individual and group," "nature and civilization," and "reason and irrationality." Xunzi's solution embodies a value-rational moral construction, emphasizing the achievement of social harmony and order through individual moral cultivation. Le Bon's solution reflects an instrumental-rational psychological manipulation, focused on utilizing the laws of group psychology to attain specific objectives. However, both theories possess limitations inherent to their respective eras and disciplines. Xunzi's theory faces challenges in modern society regarding adaptation to multiculturalism and rapidly changing environments. Furthermore, "Xunzi somewhat deviates from the Confucian emphasis on the continuity and identity of the self in concrete existence... Xunzi's demand to negate the original self through transforming nature more or less lends the ideal personality an alien quality"[15]. Le Bon's theory, meanwhile, requires further examination of its applicability and limitations in light of developments in modern psychology and sociology. "Crowd psychology, represented by *The Crowd*, while offering certain insights into the psychological characteristics of masses, neglects the background contexts—institutional, cultural, and technological—that shape mass psychology"[16]. Moreover, many details remain unexplored in this comparison, such as how the role of Xunzi's "mind" (xin) might be realized in modern society, and the specific contemporary applications of Le Bon's theory. These issues warrant further investigation. In summary, comparing the theories of Xunzi and Le Bon reveals not only differences and potential complementarities between Eastern and Western thought but also provides richer perspectives for understanding the negative potential in human behavior and its management.

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