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Writing

## Who Will Build the Better Ape?

*Wesley Freeland*

When I examine the driving forces of progress in modern humanity, I cannot help but recall author Leo Frankowski's musings on the subject of genetic manipulation as a way to drive human evolution. He posed a simple question: If a group of gorillas were asked to build an evolutionarily superior ape given unlimited genetic material and a complete working knowledge of genetic engineering, what traits would they choose to impart to this new creature? Certainly they would accelerate those traits that have served them so well in survival thus far, traits such as greater muscle mass, sharper fangs, thicker and stronger mastication structures, thicker fur, tougher bones, and other characteristics in the veins of natural combat and scavenging advantages (Frankowski). Frankowski theorized that not a single one would imagine an upright posture, larger cranial space, a hairless body, and more slender digits to be advantages, let alone select them as the most predominant features of the next stage of evolution, yet who can deny that mankind is, at least for the moment, the most advanced species on the planet? Before we swell too large with pride for our species, however, it must be pointed out that this was not because of any deliberate action of our own. Despite eons of technological advancement, we are still roughly the same species that has been thriving for 200,000 years.

It is because of this stagnation that I have long hypothesized that we are trapped within what I call the Better Ape Fallacy Loop, in which like Frankowski's theoretical gorillas we continually enhance the traits that we consider to be most beneficial to our survival while ignoring the historical and scientific precedent stating that we simply do not know what will drive our further evolution. When we attempt to force development, we only delay it and cause inexorable harm to both our species and our environment. This is displayed in no place better than our modern industrial complex, which ignores humanity's strong talents for diverse learning in favor of mechanical repetition. One of the greatest offenders in this respect is the modern meat industry. Over the course of this examination, I intend to show how the modern meat industry is directly opposing human evolutionary growth as well as basic human and environmental rights in pursuit of Building the Better Worker, as it were. In a further indictment, I hope to show how this problem not only affects local Missouri communities on a large scale already, but that the disease will only spread if left unchecked for long. In particular I will be focusing on the small town of Rockville, MO, and the foreseeable effects the monoculture labor system will have on its proposal to build a horse-slaughter plant.

These are bold charges to make against major global corporations, and I do not bring them lightly. As evidence, I indict these companies of the evolutionary crime of monoculture. The first definition of monoculture provided by the Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary is as follows: "the practice of growing only one type of crop on a certain area of land" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). This agricultural practice is known to be incredibly devastating to the land and crops

in question. Gregory Benford outlined the issue well in 1994 when he stated “Monoculture farming worldwide gains efficiency by growing the same staple—wheat, rice, corn, trees—over a large area, but this is inherently more fragile. Diseases and predators prey easily, and already erosion is a serious threat in many such areas” (Benford). It is the latter aspect, the notion of disease, predators, and environmental damage gathering with these large, identical crops that I will focus upon as I extend the concept from crops into species, using Oxford’s second definition of monoculture: “a society consisting of people who are all the same race, all share the same beliefs, etc.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). To fill in the et cetera a little farther, I will add one more aspect of monoculture: a group of individuals repeating the same task ad infinitum. This is the central definition I will be working off of, and I intend to justify it using Benford’s analysis.

The first hurdle we must clear is a concentration of particular processes in one sector of production, similar to the majority of farmers shifting to monocultured “staple crops” over the last few decades. In the American meat market, we can consider three “staple meats,” if you will, that are relevant to production: Beef, pork, and poultry. These make up nearly 90% of the total meat market, as reported by the American Meat Institute (AMI) using 2009 statistics (“Meat Packing Plants in Missouri”). If these consumption patterns were not enough, there is clear concentration of production within the meat packing and processing industry, as shown by University of Missouri researchers Mary Hendrickson and William Heffernan in their 2007 report “Concentration of Agricultural Markets.” When examining the beef, pork, and

poultry industries they found a concentration of 83.5%, 66%, and 58.5% of production in each respective industry among, at most, four companies for each industry, with the prominent names of Tyson, Cargill, and Smithfield recurring within multiple industries (Hendrickson and Heffernan). It is clear that monoculture exists within these industries already. The Rockville plant would possess similar characteristics, functioning as the only horse-slaughter plant in the United States. These characteristics are not themselves negative, however, so long as they are effective. To examine the inherent danger of species-based monoculture, we must examine both Rockville's potential labor force and the current labor force of the meat industry more closely.

Rockville is an inauspicious place at first glance, and for the most part it remains so in all subsequent observations. It is a small, modest town of 166 people stretched over a little less than a third of a mile of land. (United States Census Bureau) In many ways Rockville seems just like any other small town you would find in Missouri and elsewhere across the United States: rural, friendly, and increasingly poor in the wake of the recession. It's no secret, for those that bother to ask, that Rockville residents are desperate to see new jobs enter the area, desperate enough to take almost any work possible. The meat industry has chosen to fill this need in one of the most unorthodox ways possible, by pushing to have Rockville as the new site of the first horse slaughter plant in the United States since the practice was effectively banned in 2006 (Page). This is not the first time that industry supporters have pushed for a new plant to be opened, but the unspoken factor of this issue is that Rockville residents nearly universally support the installation of the plant, as it would boost their

economy with upwards of 50 jobs, employing a solid third of their total population (Page).

This pervasive proposal becomes problematic when considering the effects of monoculture evolution on the workers of the meat industry. Eric Schlosser noted in his book *Fast Food Nation* how workers spend their entire day repeating the same task in close quarters, day in and day out, often with a high risk of injury. He mentions that even the tragically under-reported Department of Labor statistics state that one in three meat-packing workers suffer a serious injury every year, with thousands more going unreported (Schlosser). This not taking into account the serious health hazards that develop from the repeated tasks themselves. According to Schlosser, extreme physical degradation is quite common in the meat industry, with disorders that range from tendinitis to muscular and nervous system damage in the arms, back, and shoulders (Schlosser). Injuries occur at a rate that “is almost thirty-five times higher than the national average in industry” (Schlosser 173). The cumulative effect of this abuse is best demonstrated by an account Schlosser delivers at the request of a man named Kenny Dobbins. He worked for a meat-packing plant since he was 23, suffering serious injury after injury for sixteen years straight until now he has a deficient heart, a poorly functioning immune system, and a body that has been worn to tatters to the point where he can barely walk and cannot work despite being a mere forty-five years old (Schlosser). All the more terrifying, Kenny felt no anger about any of this until his company summarily fired him when he could no longer perform the dangerous tasks they required, despite being repeatedly lied to by the plant’s medical staff and never receiving monetary

compensation for any of his injuries until three years after he was fired. While Kenny's case is extreme, it represents one driven by the same sort of desperation that currently permeates Rockville, and this gives way to an altogether more persistent disease: Memetic infection.

Richard Dawkins defined the meme as “a unit of cultural transmission...[they] propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.” (Dawkins, Brackets Added) Memes are essentially the genes of a society. They are the mental processes, concepts, and cues by which we share higher functioning thoughts with our fellow human beings. While this is certainly a useful process, it also has its dangers. I would posit that one of the most deadly aspects of monoculture is its ability to affect the memetics of a working community, particularly their moral sensibilities. The University of Massachusetts released a study last year showing how in-group morality shifts when the group feels threatened by an outside short. Conceptions of morality will go from ideas of “harm and fairness” to “loyalty and authority” (Leidner and Castano). Essentially, when a group feels threatened they stop thinking about the values of the individual (i.e. “Am I being treated fairly? Will this hurt me? Will this help me? What do I gain from this?”) to the values of the group (i.e. “How does this affect the group? Will the group survive this? How does this benefit the group?”) (Leidner and Castano). I identify this process as *memetic infection*, using the transmission of memes to exploit a group of individuals by subverting their own needs for that of a higher authority's that promises to take care of them. This is especially effective against individuals who have no choice but to trust the group or

return to greater poverty. The Rockville proposal exists in this exact form of environment, as the previous findings would indicate.

In conclusion, let us return to Benford's analysis of monoculture and highlight each area where the meat monoculture has faltered. It has allowed predatory monopolies to subsume every major branch of its production. It has introduced memetic diseases of repetition and co-dependency upon a desperate populace, resulting in increasing physical trauma. It has ultimately eroded its work-force through these tactics placing them under greater and greater stress until they can no longer work not only in the meat business, but in any business, denying the industrial ecosystem necessary human resources. In a textbook Frankowskian failure, its attempt to Build the Better Worker have only succeeded in stagnating worker rights and capabilities, much to the detriment of the industry at large. In light of this, it can be surmised that allowing this issue to spread by creating another branch of this increasingly archaic system via horse-slaughter plants will only end in the degradation of first Rockville's economy and populace, followed by the further degradation of the national economy and populace.

This is not to say that the meat industry as a whole should be halted, or cannot be saved, however. Rather, we must treat it as an endangered species: battered, fragile, and an increasing risk to its own survival. Given free reign, the industry may very well drive itself to extinction through improper practices. Criticism alone, then, is not a sufficient response. Instead, we must encourage alternative methods, better worker rights, and a more comprehensive and forward looking view on industrial planning. The inescapable fact is that we

require meat, and we require the economic stimulus that the meat industry provides. To allow it to destroy itself because we cannot stand its flaws would be a classic case of cutting one's nose to spite one's face. While we may despise the abuse of industrial meat workers, we must realize that we can only critique the system because its resources have allowed us to rise above it. It falls to us, then, not to abandon our benefactor, but to pull it up behind us as quickly and efficiently as we can. It is this policy of reform, discussion, and innovation that is best for the citizens of Rockville, the citizens of these United States, and the citizens of the world at large.

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**Issue 2**— January 2009

**Issue 10**— August 2014

**Issue 1**— Summer 2008

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**Culture**

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