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Ethology of the Freed Animal

Concept, Paradigm and Implementations to the Moral Status of Non-Human Animals

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ABSTRACT

The essay focuses on the methodological and theoretical premises of an emerging research area with both ethological and (bio)ethical implications: the ethology of the freed animal (EFA). Unlike existing ethological fields, EFA does not focus on the observation of non-human (NH) animals in a natural condition of freedom, nor on situations of captivity. Rather, EFA consists of a comparative study of NH animals that are removed from a condition of captivity, from the status of "living tool" of human beings and from any form of exploitation – instead relocated in an environment fairly appropriate to their species-specific and individual characteristics. Ideal places for this study are animal sanctuaries and parks/reserves where a previously captive NH animal can be reintroduced in their natural habitat or, when this proves impossible, in a contest appropriate to their characteristics and needs. Even though EFA exists already, as a de facto practice of the personnel running sanctuaries and parks, the field still lacks a recognizable scholarly paradigm, and is not yet acknowledged at institutional/academic level, nor were its moral implications thoroughly discussed. Consequently, one important aim for such a field is the establishment of an active interaction between the two parties involved (researchers and sanctuaries/parks operators).

Keywords: animal abuse; animal sanctuaries; anthropization; anthrozoology; captivity; epigenetic inheritance; etho-ethnology; moral status; non-invasive observation; semiotics.

1. Introduction

The present essay intends to introduce the methodological and theoretical premises for an emerging research area carrying out both ethological and (bio)ethical implications: the "ethology of the freed non-human animal" (EFA, from now on).

This particular kind of ethology, unlike the classical, does not focus on the observation of non-human (NH) animals in a natural condition of freedom in their own environment. Neither does it compare to laboratory ethology, which observes NH animals kept in captive conditions (regardless of the quality of their welfare). Rather, the EFA consists of a comparative, interdisciplinary study of NH animals that are *released* from a condition of (legal or illegal, abusive or less abusive) "confinement", from the status of "living tool" of human beings, from any form of exploitation (for profit or not) – and instead relocated in an environment as appropriate as possible to their species-specific and individual characteristics – including reinstalling the subject in their natural habitat, whenever possible. "Confinement" is as neutral a term as we could find to describe forms of significant limitation or deprivation of the NH animal's freedom: in this sense, we do not wish to include only the violent and physically damaging ones (and, as we shall see later, not only the physical ones *tout court*). "Significance" is also a keyword, because it will be important to distinguish from forms of confinement that effectively limit/impair a NH animal's freedom, from those that have no serious impact. To make a banal example, setting a few discreet, camouflaged video cameras in an area inhabited by a given NH animal in order to observe their behavior may be perceived as the quintessential limitation of freedom, due to its big brotherly/Orwellian connotations. Nevertheless, if that action has no implication on the natural course of that animal's life (which, indeed, is merely monitored, without any intention to interfere with it), we may not define it as "significant", for the hypothetical eventual removal of the cameras would not qualify as "liberation" (the NH animal shall likely behave identically, whether or not there are cameras around). If, on the contrary, the cameras – for whatever reason – causes some kind of limitation in the NH animal's life (let us say they get noticed and cause some behavioral modification), then the confinement becomes significant.

Most importantly, however, the third and ultimate keyword of our study is "anthropization". While, theoretically, not all forms of confinement can be ascribed to human action, in practice it is nearly undeniable that only the various human interventions on other species create

conditions of "confinement" in the sense we define here, and that only the liberation from these interventions makes a reasonable case for a veritable EFA.

Ideal places for this kind of observation are what we may call "contexts of release", that is, the so-called "Animal sanctuaries", of variable dimension and population (wild or domesticated NH animals, preys, or predators …), and "monitorable" natural habitats, such as natural parks and reserves provided with non-invasive camps for research (e.g., "Camp Leakey" in Borneo). Sanctuaries are an increasingly widespread type of institution conceived to host NH animals rescued from diverse forms of exploitation/abuse, with the purpose of reintroducing them to a living condition that is as much as possible compatible with their needs. Monitorable natural habitats have a longer history, but nevertheless they are still in a stage of development towards a more definite form (see, for instance, their transition from research-only areas to more open and educational spaces, where tourists and volunteers can experience, learn and acquire environmental awareness).

As such, EFA exists already, as a *de facto* practice of the specialized and/or volunteer personnel running these places – however, predictably, it lacks a recognizable scholarly paradigm, and it is yet to be acknowledged at institutional/academic level – a condition that is confirmed by authoritative representatives of that personnel itself, such as Dr. Birute Galdikas:

> To the best of my knowledge, there is not yet an established area within the natural sciences that would account for a systematic study and observation of animals like my orangutans – animals that get released into the wild after captivity. (Galdikas, personal communication, 2017)

Consequently, the information produced by EFA are not, or too little, collected in form of open databases, archives and systematized data – aspects that are crucial for any field's development. Regrettably, only a small percentage of the numerous valuable observations and information gathered particularly by sanctuaries' workers in various parts of the world become available to ethological research (unlike several parks and reserves, where the "monitoring" stage is part of the whole releasing action). The reverse is equally true, as people active in wildlife protection and sanctuaries themselves have their own challenges in keeping up with the developments of behavioral research.

In light of all this, a primary aim, in order to structure a research field like EFA, is the establishment of an active interaction between the two parties (researchers on the one hand and operators of contexts of

release). Based on that interaction, it should be possible to articulate a program for an operative EFA – distributed among scientific and ethical objectives. While looking forward for an accurate discussion on what this program may look like, in a coherent and solid way, we shall like to propose eight goals – to begin with:

1. Scientific objective I: a non-invasive, though not necessarily non-interactive, study of what we shall call "psycho-physical redemption" of the freed NH animals, of its course and of its possibilities and limits. That is: how they rely on the new condition of non-captive individuals; how they do (or do not) retake possession and control of their own bodies; how they develop (or, again, recover) a temporal-spatial *Umwelt*, in a condition that is no longer rigidly constricted and manipulated by external factors.
2. Scientific objective II: a non-invasive, though not necessarily non-interactive, study of the inter-subjective, intra-specific and inter-specific communities built and nurtured by the freed NH animals, communities which humans themselves tend to be (accepted as) members of.
3. Scientific objective III: a non-invasive, though not necessarily non-interactive, study of the new inter-subjective, intra- and interspecific cultural traditions developed by these communities: an opportunity, as we shall explain, carrying enormous scientific potentials for ethology and all the behavioral sciences.
4. Scientific-to-ethical objective I: to establish a PeerToPeer-type of knowledge exchange between researchers and workers of contexts of release, with the purpose of improving the study, the preservation, the care and the rehabilitation of the freed NH animals.
5. Scientific-to-ethical objective II: to disseminate the above-mentioned acquired knowledge at both academic and popular level, with the main purpose to spread and promote the adoption of a biocentric paradigm in ethics.
6. Ethical objective I: bring as many animals as possible to a condition of quality and dignity of life in accordance to the species-specific and individual needs of the freed NH animal.
7. Ethical objective II: establish a new channel of anthrozoological relationship, from which a novel, more accurate and respectful, level of communication and understanding between humans and other NH animals may emerge.
8. Ethical-to-juridical objective I: establish a specific moral status for the freed animal, as something that inform appropriate juridical actions (e.g., the attribution of specific, context-pertinent rights to the freed animal).

The present article has no pretension to be exhaustive at any level of these first steps of the EFA. The goal is not the *systematization* of the topic, but rather its *problematization*. Simply put, we shall place some hopefully interesting (theoretical and methodological) items on the table, in an order that may be just temporary, with the specific goal to elicit a discussion and add more items (and/or replace the existing ones) in the near future. A conscious acceptance, from the readership's part, of this explorative nature is essential for a proper understanding of this article.

2. Behavior as a self-regulative interaction: post-mechanistic perspectives in the philosophy of ethology

To a conceptual and theoretical extent, the approach to the comparative study of behavior here proposed shall explicitly bypass, not only the traditional mechanist and dualistic model of Cartesian ancestry, but also the "psycho-hydraulic" model of the classical and the first cognitive ethology (Marchesini 2016a, 2016b), the gene-centric one of "classical sociobiology" (de Waal 2001), and the deterministic model of behavior currently dominant in evolutionary psychology (Lieberman 2013).

Within an EFA framework, behavior is studied as a *self-regulative and cognitive interaction* of organisms with their inter- and intra-specific environment, and as the results of an interactive relation between the internal components of every and each body, which in animals is modulated and transmitted through epigenetic and social inheritance, social conditioning and individual experience, and for which the genetic species-specific inheritance functions as a condition of possibility (Celentano 2000, 2011, 2017).

"Self-regulative activity and interaction" means here that all organisms, of every species, need at any time to internally maintain or restore conditions, processes and physiological states which allow them to stay alive, and perform this function through explorative and energy trading activities, absorbing and transforming matter and energy present in the external environment, modifying both the latter and themselves.

This self-regulating and cognitive activity are undoubtedly limited and channeled through the constraints imposed by the anatomy and morphology of the species, the intra-specific and inter-specific context, the individual characteristics or biographical circumstances, and the contingencies. However, it allows us to understand both the history of each existed and existing species and the history of each single organism

as an active and selective exploration of the environment and construction of their ecological and social niche and their "homeorhetic" path (Waddington 1976).

What we mean by "cognitive", here, is all the activities through which organisms explore their survival chances and test their ability to actively change their physiological and/or perceptual states. Each "cognitive" activity is in this sense *a production of behavioral forms*, or of *self-regulative internal and external interactions*, enabling the performance of the organism's life cycle. In this perspective, cognitive activities are notable not only in animals, but in all the organisms, because the simple fact that organisms are capable of surviving constitutes evidence of their *ability to somehow make an object of knowledge out of their own living conditions* (Lorenz 1977; Riedl 1980; Celentano 2000, 2017). As already suggested by Jakob von Uexküll, each organism displays the ability of knowing the elements present in its "Umwelt" as *factors that influence or may affect its physiological states*. As Lorenz liked to remember, each organism, even the *Paramecium* which, when encountering a sour acid stream, rotates on itself until it manages to change direction, is able to selectively discriminate some factors present in its environment based on the "negative" or "positive" effects they have on their survival possibilities and "health" status.

3. Epigenetic inheritance and selective behavior as driving forces of evolution: post gene-centric perspectives in the evolutionary and behavioral studies

Since the 1990's, two notions, previously introduced by two great scholars of the 20th century, Ch. Waddington and J. Piaget, began to find consensus through experimental findings and took on a central relevance in the evolutionary studies: the "behavior as motor of evolution" (Piaget 1976) and the existence of that *non-genetic hereditary systems*, able to produce phenotypic modifications much faster than genetic mutations (Waddington 1975; Piaget 1976), which now we call *Epigenetic Inheritance Systems* (Jablonka and Lamb 2005; Jablonka and Lamb 2020; Nuno de la Rosa and Müller 2021).

To conceive behavior, and the hereditary epigenetic variations which it can trigger, as driving forces of evolution (here understood as a process of differentiation of organisms) means that individuals, populations and species, in the face of changes that endanger their survival or offer them new growth opportunities, *do not passively remain to wait for a favorable*

genetic mutation that allows some of them to overcome those obstacles, or exploit those resources. Individuals, populations, and species, facing with new difficulties or opportunities, *engage all the innate and/or learned resources they possess, all their cognitive endowment and experiences, to find various possible solutions*. This means, in turn, that, often, evolutionary divergences start from the sphere of behaviors, from changes in the ethological attitudes that develop as active responses to social and environmental stresses, and genetic changes intervene, not as preconditions, but as "followers" events. That is, as changes that reinforce divergences already begun at the epigenetic and ethological level (West-Eberhard 2003; Jablonka 2006; Jablonka and Lamb 2020).

This approach, already introduced by *evolutionary epistemology* and defined by K. Popper as an "exploratory or active Darwinism" which assumes that, very early in the history of life on Earth, "living organisms […] become active explorers, actively and curiously searching for new environments […] for new places to live in or, sometimes, merely from slightly modified ways of living, for slightly new ways of behaving" (Popper 1982, 39), is integrated, in the contemporary evolutionary studies, with the discoveries of the last thirty years relating to epigenetic inheritance and its relevance for development and evolution, which are supported by increasingly empirical and experimental evidence.

One of the most important studies in this field was, in the first decade of the new millennium, *Evolution in four dimension* (Jablonka and Lamb 2005), in which the authors presented, since the introduction, four important acquisitions of the contemporary ecological-evolutionary-developmental biology:

> - there is more to heredity than genes;
> - some hereditary variations are nonrandom in origin;
> - some acquired information is inherited;
> - evolutionary change can result from instruction as well as selection.
> (Jablonka and Lamb 2005, 1)

They documented the fact that, in the course of evolution, alongside the slow processes of genetic variation, three other types of selection, heredity and variation, respectively defined epigenetic, behavioral and cultural, cooperated with the first and reciprocally producing phenotypic adaptations independently of genetic or genomic mutations. In chapter 4, Jablonka and Lamb described also four different kinds of EIS which have in common the ability to transmit from mother to daughter cells information "that is not related to DNA" (Jablonka and Lamb 2005, 402), and are

indispensable to deal with rapid changes, contiguous variations or oscillations of their living and social environments. This epigenetic inerithance systems are triggered by behavioral habits and/or environmental stimuli, and can preserve or modify, within very few generations, food preferences, immune systems, cognitive abilities, psycho-physical and emotional attitudes. For instance, today a rich documentation illustrated cases of epigenetic transmission of the effects of stress or of traumatic experiences and immune deficiencies (Jablonka and Lamb 2020; Celentano and Marchesini 2021), as well as cases in which new phenotypes are produced in absence of any DNA modification (Jablonka and Lamb 2005, 339) and cases of no random genetic mutations, induced by stress or changes in the environment (Jablonka and Lamb 2005, 97-116).

These developments are making increasingly evident the close correlation between BIS (Behavioral Inheritance Systems) and EIS (Epigenetic Inheritance Systems), led to the birth of a new field of inquiry: Behavioral Epigenetics (McGowan and Szyf 2010; Champagne and Rissman 2011; Meloni 2014; Jablonka 2016), which, according to Jablonka, includes "the investigation of the role of behavior in shaping developmental-epigenetic states and the reciprocal role of epigenetic factors and mechanisms in shaping behavior" (Jablonka 2016, 42).

What are the implications and consequences of these new approaches in the fields of animal welfare and EFA? We can today prove that two groups of factors turn out to be the primary ways of triggering and channeling the modification of individual and group behaviors and their trans-generational transmission. These sets of factors include:

- events that mark the individual's biographical path from its conception onwards, and particularly all those social, emotional and cognitive experiences which produce, in the most sensitive phases of individual development, effects similar (or partially similar) to those that the classical ethology attributed to the imprinting (Mainardi 1992);
- experiences and living conditions capable of influencing the develop of a wide range of physiological and behavioral responses ranging from the immune system to emotional, relational and cognitive attitudes, both in the organisms directly exposed to them and in their descendants, without modifying their genetic code.

These are fundamental acquisitions for a field of study such as the EFA, whose starting point, as we shall see, is precisely the reconstruction of the "personal history", a biographical profile of every single NH animal observed, and of its provenance context, and whose objective is to learn to encourage as much as possible a dis-anthropization (a word

which we shall deepen in the next paragraph) of the freed NH animals, and to study its course with non-invasive methodologies.

This is why a place like an animal sanctuary is an ideal context to study the constraints and limitations that past living conditions may impose on this dis-anthropization process by the freed animals and their descendants, and to identify the factors that can be instead favor its course. In other words, this is exactly the places where a knowledge of the "molecular scars" that each individual carries behind can become a prerequisite for research aimed at favoring their self-liberation.

4. Anthrozoological considerations

With this in mind, the next step must be an extensive analysis of the taxonomy, characteristics and operativity of anthropization. The forms of anthropization that we consider worth of analysis are not only, so to speak, factual (that is, physiological, ethological, physical, etc.), but may often trespass the line of the cultural, the mythical, the metaphorical. This is due to two reasons: (*a*) socio-cultural processes, albeit not necessarily translating into tangible anthropized characteristics in a given NH subject, retain the same value and dignity of any other process (for the same reason why cultural imperialism is worth of the same scholarly attention as military imperialism, or emotional abuse is equally significant as physical abuse); (*b*) socio-cultural processes affect the human treatment of NH animals with equal (or occasionally superior) strength as all other processes (e.g., the mythical perception of the "bad wolf" has resulted in phobias, extermination of specimens, distorted understanding of wolves' behavior, etc.).

The NH animals that EFA can study are "freed" animals – not necessarily (or not yet) "free" ones. The difference emerging from these two words firstly implies that the conditions preceding the release – the *past* indeed – is of foremost importance. The long tradition of ethology has primarily focused on two types of condition: the free/wild one and the captive one. Since anthropization is obviously a process that materializes only in the latter situation, we can identify the study of free/wild NH animals as a study of "An-anthropization" (the condition of total absence of anthropization) or – when some form of confinement is likely or bound to happen – "Pre-anthropization" (the temporal condition antecedent to anthropization). As soon as an actual anthropizing process occurs, we can classify at least twenty different types of confinement, distinguished by practices, context, strength and other factors:

1. Ab-anthropization (A. developed apart from humanity);
2. Anthro-anthropization (A. aimed at anthropomorphizing – physiologically, ethologically, culturally, etc. – the NH animal);
3. Anti-anthropization (A. developed autonomously by NH animals, which may also damage humanity);
4. Archeo-anthropization (A. developed in pre-historic times, often as results of co-evolution);
5. Auto-anthropization (the NH animal, so to speak, "volunteers" to be part of the human environment, accepting its dynamics);
6. Corpo-anthropization (A. that requires a significant manipulation of the subjects' bodily constitution, physiology, etc.);
7. Credo-anthropization (illusory form of A., that may reveal itself as fallacious);
8. Grapho-anthropization (written/visual A.);
9. Legi-anthropization (A. that occurs or changes status by means of juridical or scientific regulations);
10. Ideo-anthropization (A. occurring at ideological, cultural, mythical level);
11. Idio-anthropization (A. that occurs in a confrontational manner: the NH subject/s is anthropized out of fear or specific wish to subdue);
12. Liber-anthropization (A. within which the NH animal is allowed to follow their natural biology);
13. Logo-anthropization (A. due to linguistic dynamics);
14. Loco-anthropization (A. that is characteristic of certain contextual/environmental conditions and that is not possible in others);
15. Macro-anthropization (A. as "large", possibly global, phenomenon);
16. Micro-anthropization (A. as circumscribed, very local, phenomenon);
17. Philo-anthropization (A. due to emotional attachment, affection, sexual attraction, etc.);
18. Semi-anthropization (partial A. in which the NH subject/s retain elements of their natural condition);
19. Sub-anthropization (A. that was a consequence of another anthropization);
20. Sin-anthropization (A. involving the anthropization of different species/specimens at the same time).

Each entry is not isolated from the others, but in fact often intersecting and overlapping with, containing, or being contained by, other entries.

A "freed" NH animal may thus come from radically different conditions – radically different *pasts*. Keeping up with the ways these different conditions relate to anthropization, the termination of a period of

confinement may result in two distinct states: "post-anthropization" and (as anticipated) "dis-anthropization". Post-anthropization occurs when NH animals that were previously anthropized and can now live outside the human environment/control/manipulation, bear significant traces of the anthropized condition, and – for instance – prove to be unable to re-acquire certain behavioural patterns/skills that would have characterized them if they were *not* subject to anthropization. On the other hand, dis-anthropization is the condition of a NH animal that was previously anthropized and now has disengaged at all levels from that condition, (re)gaining a reasonably an-anthropized status. Here, the NH animal, at least to a reasonable extent, gets rid (physiologically, psychologically, etc.) of their previous condition of human control, and retakes significant possession of their original profile. An example of the difference could be the ability of a predator, who had been deprived of the possibility to predate, to reacquire or not their predatory skills and therefore be able to survive on their own.

To generate "anthropization", the human being needs to have enough reasons and intentions to engage in some sort of relationship with one or more NH animals. This goes without saying and is a compulsory step of the process, so, we may establish a general set of *motivations* that push human beings to interact with other animals, whatever form these interactions may assume. We shall indicate eight of them (for details, see Martinelli 2010, 129-130): (1) adaptation; (2) progress; (3) work; (4) needs; (5) pleasure; (6) tradition and culture; (7) philosophy and research; and (8) daily life.

These eight categories of motivation materialize in twelve different roles that human beings assume as "anthropizing agents" (see Sebeok 1998, 67-73 plus the update provided in Martinelli 2010, 130-132): (1) predator; (2) partner; (3) player of sports/hobbies/games; (4) parasite; (5) pseudo-conspecific; (6) insensible agent; (7) domesticator; (8) trainer; (9) manipulator; (10) information learner; (11) signification learner; (12) defender/protector/promoter.

5. Proposals for an EFA paradigm and possible research lines

Having hopefully legitimized, from both a scientific and a humanistic perspective, the need and the existence of EFA, we can begin to articulate the paradigm as such, elaborating on the reflections proposed in the introduction to this essay.

Concept. Reiterating on what we already suggested, we can define the EFA as a comparative and interdisciplinary study of NH animals that are *released* from a condition of more or less abusive anthropization and relocated in an environment as appropriate as possible to their species-specific and individual characteristics – including reinstalling the subject in their natural habitat whenever possible.

Objectives. Also, we have already mentioned in the introduction our preliminary proposal for a program of objectives in *eight points*. It is obviously an *open* program which needs to be updated and upgraded by other researchers and operators and put to the test in field work. This program includes three "scientific objectives", two so-called "scientific-to-ethical objectives", two "ethical objectives" and one "ethical-to-juridical objective". In the next paragraph, we shall elaborate on these objectives.

Methods. If concept and objectives were already mentioned in our introductory notes, we still need to highlight some approaches and practices that nowadays characterize both the ethological research and the activities performed in contexts of release, and which are fundamental for the EFA. Also, one needs to to focus on some activities, such as playful ones, or the spontaneous exchanges of care, not only between conspecifics but also at interspecific level, an aspect which, in our view, is not only of high scientific interest, but may also play a central role in increasing welfare and social cohesion, and reducing tensions or conflicts, within interspecific communities, such as those established in contexts of release like animal sanctuaries in particular.

With this in mind, the first concept we shall discuss is that of ethology as an "animal ethnography" designed in studies like Lestel 2001, 2006, 2014, and Lestel, Brunois and Gaunet 2006. Lestel believes that only recently ethology has begun to emancipate itself from a mechanistic and deterministic approach, attributing this important turn firstly to the discovery of animal cultures and the resulting assimilation, by ethologists, of methodological approaches which were already in use in the ethnological field: "Unlike classic etho-ecology, etho-ethnology can be described as a discipline that studies the dynamics of agents which combine actions and interpretations in an ecological, historical and individual perspective" (Lestel, Brunois, and Gaunet 2006,166). Convinced that sociality, culture and individual differences are phenomena widely spread in the animal world, which only arrogance and prejudices prevented us for two millennia to recognize (Lestel 2001), Lestel observes that "the convergence between ethology and ethnography has significantly transformed studies of animal subjectivity and culture. The future of both fields lies

in a cultural zoology that treats animals as subjects partaking in culture" (Lestel 2006, 147).

Etho-ethnology became therefore "an ethnography of the way the individual beings perceive and conceive, in the course of their interactions, the behaviors of other living beings and the way they react to these behaviors" (Lestel, Brunois, and Gaunet 2006, 167), a form of comparative study of the animal behaviors, minds, and cultures which places at the center the animal understood as "a coherent agent that interprets significations in a homogenous manner […] and attempts to understand it in a historical (which calls on a temporal dimension) and social (an agent always acts in coordination with other agents) perspective" (Lestel, Brunois, and Gaunet 2006, 166).

Therefore, to assume an etho-ethnologic approach means primarily:

- To adopt observations and data logging methods which allow to distinguish, in the least invasive possible way, each individual as such, within an observed group, and each observable local or regional intraspecific difference of uses and communication systems in the populations belonging to the same species.
- That each animal is not a simple repeater of behavioral patterns typical of their species; they are a selective agent whose behavioral, cognitive, emotional and communicative features are the results of their historical and social roots and their biographical paths.
- That each social group, in every social species, confronts environmental contingencies and internal dynamics that can differentiate it from others, leading to the development of divergent interpretations of the same signals, or of modifications of the same communicative codes, preferences and uses, and so to the birth and consolidation of different interpretative and behavioral traditions.

By way of a protocol for each context of release, the data collection methodologies of EFA would include:

- a biographical profile for each NH animal hosted, inclusive of an anamnesis of the past experiences and trauma suffered – as exhaustive as possible;
- a clinical profile which illustrates the animal's overall health status, obtained with the less invasive techniques today available;
- a filmic and photographic documentation of physical status and behavior of every hosted individual at the time of their introduction in the context of release;
- a methodical monitoring of their post-anthropization pathway.

Observation Techniques

According to the EFA approach, the ethologist planning to study NH animals hosted in contexts of release will have to:

a. create a research project that is fully compatible with the ethical regulations of the hosting structure and that is generally respectful of the freedom of the NH animals studied;
b. be accepted as a non-disturbing presence within the interspecific community in which they wish to be involved, e.g., by initially contributing to the caring of the community itself (animal feeding, maintenance of the living environment…);
c. adopt exclusively observation and documentation techniques that do not imply any constraint on the animals subject to them.

6. Conclusions: what moral status for the freed animal?

We consider it beyond our scope to develop an argument on the moral status of NH animals *in general*. Before proceeding, however, it may be useful to state (at a *very* general level, and putting aside nuances for the time being) that our position is based on three pillars:

1. We reject any form of "human exceptionalism"-based morality. We consider the latter a result of a self-assigned ontological superiority that has no ground in the ethical sense. In Martinelli 2021 the term "Anthropotheosis" was introduced in order to describe the process by which (*a*) humanity explains the world through humanity; (*b*) humanity as it is becomes the belief that embodies the ideal of humanity; (*c*) such belief is implemented with a number of scientifically and/or ethically unfounded notions ("unfounded" as in "not yet scientifically proven", "scientifically proven wrong" and/or "ethically inadmissible"); and (*d*) with a number of imaginary elements that merge with the real ones, forming a mythical discourse. Human exceptionalism in a quintessential form of anthropotheosis, as it founds its anthropocentric moral hierarchy on capacities that are thought to distinguish humans as morally considerable beings, but which have been observed in the non-human world. Since human behavior and cognition share significant roots with the behavior and cognition of other species, any argumentation on sharp behavioral or cognitive boundaries between humans and other animals is controversial at least, and any attempt to define human uniqueness by identifying given capacities is at least misleading when it comes to establishing a moral status of NH animals.

2. We consider "sentience" as the key condition around which any idea of moral status should be founded. Not intelligence, not taxonomy, not intentionality, or else. Sentience is what entitles to make a solid case for a right to bodily liberty and a right to bodily integrity in NH animals. When scientific evidence is lacking on a given species' sentience (that is, when no scientifically proven counterargument exists), Luisella Battaglia's notion of "critical anthropomorphism" (1997) should be applied: "any doubt [about sentience or else] should be gauged to benefit the weakest subject. In particular, the presupposition of similarity, when there is no clear counterproof, should be interpreted in favor of the animals" (Battaglia 1997, 124).
3. We support, both in ethical and legal terms, the recognition of the legal status of sentient beings to animals, ratified in 2007 by the EU (Lisbon Treaty), and believe that all the existing legal systems must conform to it. For us, to recognize to NH animals the right to dignity of life and self-determination, it is not necessary that them have a self-concept. Instead, it is sufficient that they possess that specific characteristic of sentience which is self-perception, or sense of self. That is: the condition of perceiving every modification of one's body and of the environmental context, as qualitative modifications, or, in other words, as events that create, or can create, states of discomfort or relaxation, suffering or well-being, attraction or repulsion.

With this in mind, we are interested in proposing a few moral implementations that may derive from an EFA, and that should inform future legislation but also good practice from operators, volunteers and visitors of contexts of release. These are not necessarily "specifics" of the freed animals (that is, features that *separate* them from free and captive ones, and which therefore require *ad hoc* legal/moral approaches): rather, they are "focusers" – aspects that may have been considered less important (or even overlooked) when reasoning on the moral status of free and/or captive NH animals, and that freed animals help us drawing our attention to.

Firstly, an unmistakable reinforcement of the acknowledgment of *individuality*, in the etho-ethnological sense described above. That means: distinguishing each individual as such, and acknowledging any observable local or regional intraspecific difference; not treating each animal as a simple repeater of behavioral patterns typical of their species, and acknowledging the environmental contingencies and internal dynamics that differentiate each social group in each social species from others.

Secondly, an accurate acknowledgment of the *past*. Each freed NH animal comes from different pasts, that is, different life conditions. The

(re)gaining of an an-anthropized status must necessarily go through a thorough analysis of what type of anthropization (and with what specifics) the animal was subject to. This way only the animal may get at least partially rid of their previous condition of human control, and related abuse suffered.

Thirdly, by consequence, there must be also a specific acknowledgment of what we may call the *traumatological profile* (information on suffered distress, abuse, mutilation …), and therefore all the conditions of release (including whatever amount of more or less monitored time the animal spends in facilities like a sanctuary) must be arranged in order to avoid the repetition of similar traumas and the healing process.

Fourth, a moral obligation (that translates directly into factual commitment) to ensure both *quality and dignity of life* to each freed animal taken care of in any context of release. If we take, as example, Daniel Raphael's theory of human motivation (Raphael 2015), we understand why it is necessary to talk about both quality and dignity of life (of course, by now, we hope we do not have to explain that any conclusion that Raphael seems to apply to "human" subjects and communities, are in our opinion applicable to all the NH subjects and communities in Lestel's sense). "Dignity" is a concept that expresses an intrinsic right to be (*a*) valued and (*b*) treated ethically. Raphael discusses three basic values, as foundations of human motivation: quality of life, growth and equality. In his opinion, quality of life pursues growth for a "liveable society", dignity of life pursue it for a "just society", which in our case means a society respectful both of the rights of all the sentient beings and of the individual, gender, cultural and species-specific differences. Quality of life wants people to be treated well, dignity of life wants them to be treated ethically: the member of a given ethnic minority who is wealthy beyond their basic needs and is properly educated and assisted by the state, is a subject who receives quality of life; but if, in the meanwhile, he is still discriminated against for belonging to that ethnic group, then it is not given to him "dignity of life". Similarly, a freed animal in a context of release must be entitled to both (*a*) proper care, assistance and nourishment, and (*b*) considerations and facilitation of their individuality in direct connection with their anthropized past and state of distress.

To exemplify these four points, we can use a case-study from the Lithuanian animal sanctuary *Trys paršeliai* (*Three Little Pigs*), the first of such facilities in the entire Baltic region (https://trysparseliai.com/en/), which one of the co-authors of this article, Dario Martinelli (who lives and works in Lithuania) has visited numerous times. The sanctuary hosts several mostly farm animals coming from different, and all

equally disturbing, experiences of abusive anthropization. One of the most touching stories concerns the cow Zuika. Zuika is a dairy cow that was rescued from slaughterhouse at age 12, when she had become too old to be once again impregnated and deprived of her calves. During her life – Martinelli was explained by one of the sanctuary managers, Mr. Edvardas Stalionis – she had been impregnated ten times, which means that ten calves were subtracted to her and either sent to slaughter or to other dairy farms if they were females. Zuika spent all 12 years in a small family-run farm, chained outside most of the year and kept in a small dark barn during winter. She was also often beaten with farming tools like pitchforks or shovels, particularly when she would try to move beyond a "designated" area and, for instance, reach the fence. With that in mind, during Martinelli's visits, the cow displayed several behavioral patterns of clearly pathological origin. Among these, some were perfectly recognizable as consequences of her life experience. First, even if she was now given an ample area where to graze and relax, and of course no chains whatsoever, she would still cover a perimeter that was safely distant from the fences, evidently fearing a punishment in case she approached them. Second, Mr. Stalionis explained that Zuika could get extremely distressed, and occasionally hysterical, at the sight of pitchforks and shovels, and that he and the rest of the operators had to pay attention not to use those tools in her presence. Third, while of an extremely mild nature, Zuika was never particularly pleased to interact with human adults. She would not be aggressive with them, of course (who knows what kind of punishment she might have received in the past, in case she would dare), but she had a way of gently pushing the visitor with her head towards the outside of the enclosure, as if showing that she was not too pleased to interact with them. On the contrary, she had no problem whatsoever with kids (and, incidentally, she is adored by them – including Martinelli's son). Without going too much into detail, here is a simple case that calls for an attention to individuality, past, traumatological profile, and quality+dignity of life. Zuika, in other words, has her own history, her own traumas, and must be ensured a certain standard of life that is not applicable to other cows or other guests of the sanctuary. E.g., no other animal living in *Trys paršeliai* fears fences or farming tools, and certainly not all cows do.

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