Albert was a rooster who was born wild and lived wild on our grounds at VINE Sanctuary in Vermont. He slept up in one of the tallest pine trees on the property with about thirty other feral and wild birds, came down to eat and drink during the day, and generally lived exactly as he pleased. That all ended at some point in the second year of his life, when the people across the street threatened to murder him and his friends because they occasionally ventured into their yard. We held off the neighbors with a promise that we would have a stockade fence built within a couple of weeks. To keep Albert and about twelve other chickens safe until the fence was erected, we caught them and cooped them up in a small unused barn until the fence was complete. Unfortunately, during his time in the barn, Albert hurt his leg, and neither we nor the veterinarian could figure out what had happened; all we knew was that suddenly he was limping and could put no weight on the leg. We embarked upon a course of successive treatments, including wrapping his leg (no effect), giving him leg massages (no effect), and giving him cage rest (no effect). After about six weeks of cage rest we realized that if he was going to heal, it would not come from living in a cage. We decided to release him to the “sick bay,” a quiet yard with just one other rooster—an older ex-cockfighter who doesn’t bother too much with young upstarts anymore—and a few older and/or previously injured hens.
For the first two weeks, Albert did nothing but eat, drink, and sit, watchful, alongside the fence. When he walked, he limped, and it was increasingly clear that his leg was atrophying to a degree that would most likely be irreversible. Over time, Albert wandered about the yard more, and even interacted with some of the hens who lived there, but he was never the same as he had been when he was wild and living as he pleased with his wild friends. After a few months, we found Albert dead one morning in the coop. He had had no sickness or injury other than his chronic leg issue (which in most other birds is quickly overcome). He had not declined in any noticeable way, nor had his behavior changed in those few weeks. Moreover, he was young—a born-wild chicken who should have lived ten to fifteen years, easily. Why did he die? It was clear to me that once he finally accepted he would never walk well again—that he would never be free again—his life simply wasn’t worth living, and so he died.

I begin with Albert because his particular situation reverses the normal order of things for us at VINE Sanctuary. Usually we accept animals from various captive situations and introduce them to lives that, while still technically captive for most of them, are as “free feeling” as we can make them. For the chickens in particular, the yards are large and include trees, bushes, shelters, rocks, and other things that they find interesting to explore, climb upon, or hide under. Every chicken yard has places that are free from snow in the winter and shaded from sun in the summer. We make sure all of the chickens have enough variety in their diets, treat their illnesses and injuries as they arise (and as we are able, as some chicken illnesses are mysterious to doctors and/or impervious to treatment), and otherwise we leave them alone. Way back when the egg factory farms were releasing spent hens to anyone who would pay for them, we found that even these individuals—arguably the most tormented of farmed animals in terms of both the length and the conditions of their captivity—are able to make the psychological journey from enslaved to free within a reasonable amount of time. VINE generally accepts animals who have been caged and offers them freedom; with Albert, that order was reversed. I am convinced that his death was related to his captivity.

Certainly, true freedom escapes almost all farmed or formerly farmed animals. We use the term “as free as possible” deliberately, as fences, enforced routines, involuntary medical procedures and regimes (including everything from forced sterilization to force feeding), and other impositions certainly do not comprise a free state of being for those on the receiving end. Those of us in the sanctuary movement routinely make decisions about the animals in our care (and under our control) that we, as ethical individuals, should find extremely problematic. How can one justify taking the reproductive ability away from another individual? How about taking the possibly-fertilized eggs of a broody
hen, or penning up an active cow in a stall because she needs rest for an injury? The answer is simple: we justify these decisions because the alternatives are unacceptable. We live in a world that requires the rescue of members of certain species because other members of our own species will hurt and kill them if we don’t; we do what we need to do, as ethically as possible, within the context of that reality. We also know—those of us who work with formerly farmed animals—that for most of them, survival on their own is an impossible goal. So-called broiler chickens, for example, are genetically engineered to reach slaughter weight at six weeks of age (i.e., when they are still babies), are bright white (not exactly easy to camouflage), have internal organs that cannot keep up with their massive preprogrammed weight gain, have legs that will not hold their weight once they reach a certain size, and have thin skin (the kind humans like to eat), which rips at the slightest provocation. They and most other farmed animals have no chance at all on their own, and so their only choices are death or captivity.

MAINTAINING CONTRADICTIONS

For these and other reasons, liberationist-oriented sanctuary workers such as myself continue to keep animals captive even while we deplore captivity. Given this troubling dichotomy—that is to say, given that we willingly do something in the smaller picture which we know to be unethical in the bigger one—we rely upon a combination of acquired knowledge and continuous observation to ensure that we do not stray from our self-defined purpose, which is to offer formerly farmed animals a chance to live life as much on their own terms as possible; to allow them to sustain a reasonable quality of life the conditions of which vary from species to species, type to type, and individual to individual. Acquired knowledge comes from a variety of sources, including accumulated information from veterinary visits, information shared with other sanctuary workers, as well as articles and books. Such knowledge is most helpful in times of injury or illness. Continuous observation, on the other hand, is a more powerful tool when ensuring that life in captivity resembles, to the furthest possible extent, life in freedom, for as many individuals as possible. It also helps us to ensure that life in captivity is meaningful for as many individuals as possible, as they themselves find meaning, even if their freedoms are restricted.

What does continuous observation entail? To start, the observer needs a baseline. Chickens of all types (whether “meat” or “egg”) show interest in life by walking around, scratching at the ground, eating and drinking, making a wide variety of noises, flapping their wings and/or flying, exploring their
environments, running after such things as eggs and bugs, laying eggs and/or getting broody (for some, that is to say—not all hens want babies), having sex (for some), climbing on various objects, expressing anger or distress at actions they find unacceptable (such as being picked up for medical care), sitting quietly next to one or more fellow birds, showing interest in new arrivals, and performing other, similar, behaviors. They need chicken companions of both sexes, space, interesting things to get under and climb over, a combination of sun and shade, clean food and water (warm in the winter and cool in the summer), and a clean shelter at night. These are baseline requirements that help inspire baseline positive behaviors. One need not ascribe any meaning to these behaviors to determine that they indicate a healthy, high-functioning chicken individual (as we know them to be today).

Once established, however, the baseline is challenged almost daily. Some chickens roam as many acres as you give them, while others deliberately choose to spend their time in small yards they could leave if they wished. Some chickens (usually roosters) prefer to spend most of their time alone—in sight of other birds, but alone—while others are very much group-oriented individuals. Some hens are as placid as the stereotypical New England complacent breeder of chicks, while others regularly get into physical spats with other hens. I’ve seen roosters whose companions are several hens, roosters whose companion is one other rooster, and roosters who don’t do well with anyone much except very young birds. Most hens are excellent mothers, but we’ve had a few “crack hens” (as we affectionately call them) who abandon their babies within a month or two (presumably when they are tired of caring for them). Albert, who started this chapter, slept outside in a tree through the highest winds and biggest snows, while Boo Boo, a fourteen-year-old mini rooster, prefers to sleep inside under the wings of some of the larger hens.

Over time, as individual differences become more pronounced, it becomes easier to return to the baseline in a more informed fashion and learn (in a visceral sense) some of the universal indicators of well-being and ill-being, all the way down to the question of whether or not a chicken is eating or drinking. Such knowledge is especially useful when chickens lose the use of their legs, such as when they contract Marek’s disease. If they cannot move, but are still interested in the world around them and continue to eat and drink, we have no reason to conclude that life is not worth living for them, just as we would not conclude the same thing about a human paraplegic. Every year for the past thirteen years I have watched and learned from these individuals—thousands of them—with one primary purpose in mind: to ensure that their lives in captivity are as rich and meaningful to them as possible. I have no desire for these individuals to be my companions, nor are they my surrogate babies (sentiments I have heard from many otherwise well-intentioned people over the years); they
are people in their own right who, through deliberate human actions, ended up being (a) born, (b) exploited, neglected, or otherwise harmed, and (c) brought to our sanctuary. All of these things happened against their will. But again—given the alternative, which is either continued suffering and/or exploitation or death—life in the “fake freedom” of a sanctuary is ethical and justified.

Taking a more comprehensive look at the alternative is critical if one claims that sanctuary is an improvement upon it. It isn’t too hard to tell from the behaviors of chickens upon their arrival here what their lives used to be like in exploitative captivity situations. Hens from egg factories are the most notorious in terms of their Holocaust-survivor-style appearance and behaviors. Emaciated, pale, and almost completely featherless, these hens can barely walk when they first encounter actual dirt under their feet. They take one tentative step after another, which makes sense given that for eighteen months or so they’ve never left the confines of a cage. They are extremely cautious around the other birds, and in fact sometimes that caution never leaves them; this is magnified in their fear of humans. Over time, their halting steps become more graceful, and some of them have even ended up sleeping in the trees; that transition can take between a couple of weeks to a couple of years, given how horribly compromised by captivity they are when they arrive.¹

More birds are arriving at sanctuaries from backyard bird situations, a problem that is growing as people come to learn that caring for chickens can be messy, labor-intensive, and expensive, not to mention the problem that occurs when people order chicks through the mail and find out that biology mandates the existence of at least a few roosters. These birds tend to be less afraid of other birds and/or humans. When they arrive in a group, they usually continue to affiliate with the other birds with whom they came—sometimes for a week or two, and sometimes forever. They generally have not been severely confined, so they have fewer psychic shackles to shed. However, the fact that they tend to resist exploring more than a very small area outside their coops tells us they have never known freedom and, now that they have relative freedom, they are afraid of it.

“Broiler” birds (those raised for flesh) who are liberated from farming situations tend to be afraid of humans for quite some time after their arrival here. Some among the current group of birds whom we rescued from a Yom Kippur ritual still shrieked after several months of living at the sanctuary when we help lift them into the coops if they cannot make it on their own (although others of them are happy to be held). Cockfighting hens are the closest to feral chickens, even more so than the roosters (as the roosters have been handled by humans far more than the hens), and tend to take to the trees almost immediately.² The roosters, on the other hand, are usually quite gentle with humans, although their terror of other roosters influences their behavior for quite some time until
they learn they are not rewarded for fighting other roosters. The emotional commonality across all of these initial behaviors is fear. Chickens are a courageous species, on the whole, and adapt to extreme changes far better than humans do, but one can see their acquired fears in the ways they curtail their movements, in the choices they make (or do not make), and in other behaviors.

Birds from these and other situations eventually shed most of the fear-based behaviors they acquire during their captivity. Some behaviors, as those of the broilers, or of many former egg factory inmates who never feel comfortable around humans, never go away. Such behaviors include running away from us whenever we walk around the yards, screaming when we pick them up for various reasons, and either posturing as if to attack us, or actually attacking us. Because humans have been the ones who have hurt all of the animals who live here, the human caretakers never impose ourselves upon them. If the birds want relationships with us, we are happy to cultivate those relationships; when they want to keep their distance, so do we, and only in extreme situations do we force contact (e.g., when they want to sleep under a bush and we know they will most likely die from predation if they do). We provide them with as much space as possible (for the roosters in particular, far more than is recommended even by sanctuary folks); we provide them with the basic essentials for living a meaningful life in the context of being a chicken; and we leave them alone unless and until they make it clear they want some attention from us. We want them to feel they are living their own natural lives even though most of them can never do so because of the limitations foisted upon them by human scientists and farmers.

This approach to working with liberated, formerly farmed animals is not necessarily that taken by other sanctuaries. Many advocate and cultivate far more contact-intense relationships between human workers and animal “residents.” Everyone in those sanctuary situations has a human name, everyone is handled by humans more than just for bare necessity, and none of the chickens are allowed to sleep in trees or otherwise (re)learn wild/feral behaviors. We at VINE do not condemn such approaches, but neither do we feel compelled to adopt them ourselves. We generally believe that, with chickens particularly, part of making a captive situation feel less captive is by allowing captives as great a degree of choice as possible within the context of captivity. Thus, except in cases of necessity, contact with humans is their choice, not ours.

All told, there are two primary things that make captivity in the context of sanctuary ethical. First is our continual observation of their behaviors, both upon their arrival and through their lifespan, which helps to ensure that their sanctuary-based captivity is as “free feeling” as possible. Second is our intentionality. We believe that in the context of an ideal world—one in which all animals were free to live their lives as they chose—our work would be unethical.
Regardless of how close we may feel to many of the individuals who pass through these figurative doors, we know that it would be better for most of them to have never existed, given how genetically altered and unhealthy chickens now are, and given that 99.9 percent of their counterparts will never know anything except exploitation, suffering, and untimely death during their tenure on this planet. Put simply, we know that what we do is not the same thing as providing actual freedom to the people who live here. It is this knowledge, on top of our watchfulness, that helps to ensure the animals who live here are as insulated from a captive state of being as possible.

Captivity that is imposed upon individuals for the sake of (animal) agriculture or other exploitative ventures, however, has no justification. Whether or not such enforced captivity (commonly and euphemistically referred to as “domestication”) was ever necessary for our survival or otherwise ethical thousands of years ago when it began is a moot point—one to be argued about for the sake of entertainment or historical curiosity, perhaps, but certainly not germane to our world as it is today. The fact is that it is not necessary today, and in fact is counterproductive to an unhealthy world undergoing climate change. Beyond the question of necessity, however, rests another issue: the bizarre
nature of captivity for food. The concept of farming animals—of breeding ani-
mals into captivity and keeping them there while they are used and/or until
they are killed for their flesh or skin—is extremely odd when considered in the
context of a world with no property lines, no national borders, and, in general,
little to nothing in the way of ownership. So when did it begin? Who came up
with the idea of domesticating nonhuman animals in the first place?

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DOMESTICATION OF
CHICKENS

While there is some dispute as to the exact origins of modern chickens (i.e.,
whether they all descended from the wild jungle fowl of Southeast Asia or
whether they had multiple progenitors), most scientists believe they were first
domesticated between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago (Potts 2012, 4). This timeline
establishes chickens as one of the earliest animals to be domesticated, along
with sheep and goats, who were domesticated around 10,000 years ago (Mench,
2009, 121). The first remains of domesticated chickens were found in what
are now China and Pakistan, and date from 7,500 years ago (Potts 2012, 4).
By 3000 BCE, domesticated chickens had been introduced in Russia, Turkey,
and parts of eastern Europe; throughout most of Europe by 500 BCE; and to
North America by about 1100 AD (Potts 2012, 4). Egypt in particular ramped
up not only the domestication of the chicken, but also the industrialization of
same; Smith and Daniel (2000, 14–16) describe enormous incubators capable
of hatching 10,000 to 15,000 thousand chicks at once, heated by fires that were
kept at a constant (and ideal) 105 degrees Fahrenheit. Their feats regarding the
industrialization of chickens for their eggs and flesh were unmatched until fifty
years ago, and were closely tied to the need to feed a large (and also captive)
workforce that was busy building pyramids and other state-initiated projects.

Fast forward to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when, in the United
States and Europe particularly, the scientific revolution was gaining adherents
among the class of “learned gentlemen” who, among other things, turned their
attention to “the chicken” (Smith and Daniel 2000, 204). Given that, since their
domestication, chickens had long been regarded as objects to use and/or dis-
pose of as we wished, it is easy and natural to see how they became objects of
interest to these amateur scientists. Breeding was especially popular, particu-
larly as Asiatic breeds were imported from China (Smith and Daniel 2000, 205),
and breeders soon were divided into two camps: those who bred chickens for
show and fun, creating new breeds one after another, and those who bred them
for business and profit. Those in the latter group eventually won out over the
former; as Smith and Daniel (2000, 232) note,
By the end of the nineteenth century the national preoccupation with chickens had induced many farmers substantially to increase the size of their flocks and the proportion of their incomes derived from the sale of eggs and chickens. Chickens that had ranged the barnyard and the farm found themselves confined in large outdoor areas, their activities and their output, once natural and uninhibited, now increasingly controlled.

Of course, one may strongly disagree that chickens’ “output” was ever natural and uninhibited once humans took control of their lives, but the salient point here is that the captivity of chickens took a great leap forward in terms of intensity. It was only a matter of time before this happened; the joint demands of capitalism and human-centrism mandate that the trajectory of “progress” always moves toward more and bigger, all costs to everyone else be damned. It was inevitable, given this perspective, that someone would discover the incubator—that it would catch on (in the 1880s, in Petaluma, California, spurred by a farmer named Christopher Nisson)—and that increasing numbers of humans would take the process of creating baby chickens into their own hands as they had done with other aspects of chickens’ lives (Smith and Daniel 2000, 235–236). Hens were no longer seen as thrifty God-fearing animals to be admired (even as they were held captive and killed at will), but rather as egg-churning machines who existed to turn a profit for their owners. This new approach to the farming of eggs took another giant leap forward during the Great Depression when people discovered that the rate of egg laying by chickens is related to light (Smith and Daniel 2000, 264). It was this discovery that propelled the captivity of chickens from the confinement of yards toward the captivity of cages.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Kimber Farms (yesterday’s equivalent of Perdue Chicken) continued and accelerated the push toward the mechanization of chickens (Smith and Daniel 2000, 279). The work done by their geneticists to produce a hen who could lay far more eggs in a year than previous hens were able to do (250 for the “newly improved” hens, as opposed to 160 for the previous “models”) may seem like a shocking deviation from humans’ previous “relationship” with chickens, but in fact there was nothing surprising about it. While there might be a sort of romantic haze hovering over the breeding programs of the genteel amateur scientists of the Victorian era, that haze has everything to do with our own beliefs in our right to control and make captive individuals from other species, and nothing to do with the reality of the situation; the reality that dictates that once one justifies keeping animals captive, the only obstacles to further control are current levels of science and technology. In other words, our Victorian gentlemen would have been building artificial wombs and splicing spider genes into goats had those abilities been developed in their time. Kimber’s contributions to the world of poultry spurred other developments as
Captivity in the Context of a Sanctuary for Formerly Farmed Animals

well, including the splitting of chickens into egg-laying and meat birds (Smith and Daniel 2000, 280), the “improvement” of meat birds such that they could be slaughtered as early as seven weeks of age (Smith and Daniel 2000, 282), and the futuristic factory-style slaughterhouses in which chickens are hung upside down by their feet, dunked in electrified water, run past whirring blades to have their throats cut, and bled out as they have their feathers plucked from them by mechanical fingers, often while they are still alive (Smith and Daniel 2000, 283).

It didn’t take long for these developments to translate into an almost exponential growth in chicken-related “output.” In 2012, egg producers the world over produced 65 million tons of eggs (Global Poultry Trends 2013), and chicken meat farmers produced 104.5 million tons of flesh (FAO 2012). Both of these figures are expected to rise in coming years. All of this, of course, was made possible by the initial acceptance of captivity as an ethical state of being. The vast underlying commonality among all of these ventures—from the great incubators of Egypt to the killing blades of Perdue—is the belief that it is ethically acceptable for humans to confine certain animals for our own purposes. But is it ever ethical to hold anyone captive?

CAN CAPTIVITY EVER BE AN ETHICAL CHOICE?

Most people who are animal liberationist in spirit get very simplistic when answering this question. We are speaking here of the actual lives of actual individuals: tens of billions of chickens, pigs, cows, sheep, goats, and many more nonhuman animal species who languish under the bonds of captivity. Countless billions of individuals from these species over the past several thousand years have seen their lives begin and end in captivity. They are not abstract theories bandied about, nor are they interesting ideas to trade over beer or coffee. Their lives—for we can all agree that they have lives, that they live and breathe, feel pain and fear, express a range of behaviors and emotional states, and so forth—are real and tangible. Therefore, what matters to them in the context of this particular debate (i.e., whether or not it is ethical to place nonhuman animals into captivity) are the actions we as humans take toward them. Emotions and ideas don’t count for much when regarding the lives of actual individuals. For example, I may profess to love animals, but if I hurt them through my actions, my love means little.

Making this question of animal captivity more difficult for many humans are diverging opinions about such things as whether or not the sentience of creatures is significant when regarding their right to live life on their own terms, whether or not nonhuman animals possess culture and other supposedly “human” attributes (and whether the answer to this question matters in
terms of their right to live free), and whether the reason for their captivity (i.e., for their sake or ours) is relevant to the fact of their captivity. Certainly, endless hours have been spent, and countless pages have been written, debating these and other questions. Many people tend to believe that the answers to these questions should hold all of the weight in this conversation; that is to say, such people tend to believe, for example, that proving that birds are intelligent (in the way most humans in the developed world have defined intelligence) should and will pave the way to more “humane” treatment of bird individuals. They tend to see this issue of animal captivity as complex, fraught with intricate layers, worthy of research followed by contemplation on said research followed by more studies and yet more contemplation.

I, however, being the cofounder of an animal sanctuary in Vermont, am on the front lines of animal care in a liberationist perspective. Over time, as I have observed chickens and many other formerly farmed animals, I have become increasingly stark in my beliefs and thinking about these issues. While I completely agree that life itself—the vast biosphere in which all living and nonliving beings interact in virtually infinite ways—is incomprehensibly complex, I have come to see that the ethics of our actions within that biosphere are not particularly complicated. After all, at this point in time, many humans agree that certain human-on-human actions are ethically objectionable (e.g., rape or child abuse) regardless of attempted justifications that rely upon cultural (or other) contexts, so why can we not agree that certain human-on-nonhuman actions are equally unsupportable?

Captivity for the sake of exploitation is one such unsupportable action. It is never ethical to place an individual of any species in captivity for any purpose other than the sole reason of protecting said individual. Moreover, it is unethical to place any individual in captivity if there exists another way to grant both freedom and a reasonable measure of safety to said individual. We must finally realize that chickens (and all other farmed animals) are individuals, people of other species, folks who, like everyone else on the planet, want to live their lives on their own terms within the boundaries of the ecosystems that have developed to support them. They no more choose captivity than individuals of the human species. It is time to allow people like Albert the freedom to live life on their own terms. As much as I love having the privilege of working and living around so many individuals of other species, it is more than time to put sanctuary workers like me out of commission by rendering obsolete the reasons for our work.

Notes

1. It should be noted that hens from egg factories are almost impossible to rescue any longer, since owners of such factories don’t want consumers to know how poorly they treat their “happy hens.”
2. Feral chickens are increasingly common in many places, including Key West and New Orleans. They are descendants of domesticated chickens who have gotten free, been thrown out of their captive enclosures, or otherwise found themselves free to live in the unused spaces of human civilization.

3. For a complete explanation of the pioneering method VINE developed to rehabilitate fighting cocks, as well as other relevant information about cockfighting, please visit this URL: http://vine.bravebirds.org/projects/rooster-rehab/.

REFERENCES


