The debate about the (in-/) voluntarity of therianthropy is more complicated than it may appear (English)

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Abstract It's one of the questions that comes up from time to time in online spaces around therianthropy: "Is therianthropy involuntary?". This article doesn't position itself on one side or another. Instead, it argues that to have a productive conversation about this question, participants need to first do ground work, defining what exactly they're referring to when they speak about identity. Because therianthropy, like practically any identity, encompasses both: voluntary, and involuntary aspects.

1. Context

A few days ago, a Reddit post on r/Therian, which has since been removed by the moderators, sparked a bit of attention.[1] In it, the poster questioned the reportedly unquestioned claim that therianthropy is involuntary, claiming that it lacks justification. The subreddit, meanwhile, states in its sidebar that therianthropy "is considered to be involuntary" without going into more detail.

This question of *voluntarity* is one that has also come up in conversations I've had with several therians and otherkins over the past few months. And one thing always stood out to me: this topic requires a deeper introspection than what takes place in most forums. Which is why I feel compelled to write this article.

[1] The comments under the now-removed post can be found at https://www.reddit.com/r/Therian/comments/1vsrkrc/removed_by_moderator/ as of August 20th, 2026.

2. What this article is not

This article won't get into finding an answer to the question at hand. While I have heard good arguments for both sides, my opinion isn't full formed, yet. I do have an opinion – I do believe that we would benefit from dropping the specification – and the article may be tainted by such bias. But ultimately, I don't want this article to add yet another voice into the depth of this discussion. Instead, I want it to be an invitation to take a step back. To ask questions we need to answer before we can dive into the actual topic.

3. Therianthropy encompasses both voluntary and involuntary aspects

Even without looking at the complexity of therianthropy being an umbrella term for many different experiences (shifting vs. non-shifting, spiritual vs. psychological, etc., just to name a few), at its core, a *therian identity* encompasses different aspects:

1. The experiences a therianthrope associates with their therianthropy, may that be shifting, a sense of belonging, phantom limb sensations, or something else;
2. The (ultimately unknown) origin of these experiences (may that be spiritual, psychological, neurological, etc.);
3. The (linguistic) act of describing of these experiences as non-human.

I don't think it's controversial to say that some of these aspects are voluntary.

For example, the fact that I describe my phantom sensations as "cat ears" instead of "a weird sensation on top of my head of body parts that aren't really there" is a choice. That I describe my instincts as cat-like, instead of listing them out in detail without referencing cats, is a (convenient) choice. Additionally, **some** experiences can be voluntary – it is basically uncontested that various shifts can be triggered through meditation and other means. Voluntarilly.

With that, I have covered two out of the three aspects I identified above. And yes: I believe there is a counter-argument to be made that all of these are caused by an unknown cause. But let us, for the sake of argument, assume that the cause becomes known and is a (single) voluntary one. I don't think that this is likely, but let us assume eating ice cream in youth caused my therianthropy 😉. Would that make me less of a therian? Since this most likely isn't the cause, I don't care too much about the answer, but it is an interesting thought experiment to get to the argument I'm trying to make:

To debate whether therianthropy is involuntary, we first have to establish which aspects would have to be involuntary in order for therianthropy to be the same. Or, in other words: what, at its core, makes a therian a therian?

Because, clearly, not all aspects that lead up to me identifying as a feline, and therefore, a therian, are involuntary. Would I still be a therian if I experienced the same things, but didn't call myself a therian?[2] What about if I experienced a completely distinct set of experiences to those of a(nother) therian, but still see value in using that label, with all its associtations, to describe my experiences?

Unfortunately, most discussions about this topic lack the necessary definitions. And, therefore, contain little known meaning within lots of words used to try to convey such meaning. Because they don't define what aspects they consider to be (in-/) voluntary. I fear that the same is true for "simple" definitions claiming that therianthropy is "involuntary".

[2] This actually leads us into very complex territory when it comes to identity labels. Can an identity label be ascribed by others or can it only be applied by someone for themselves?