The Ethics of Elephants in Circuses

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PHI103: Informal Logic

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Annotated example for Week Three Assignment
THE ETHICS OF ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

Main Argument:

P1: Elephants are highly intelligent animals.

P2: Putting elephants in circuses requires them to live their lives in extreme confinement.

P3: Anything that requires highly intelligent animals to live their lives in extreme confinement is wrong unless it serves a purpose that outweighs the suffering involved.

P4: Putting elephants in circuses does not serve a purpose that outweighs the suffering involved.

C: Therefore, putting elephants in circuses is wrong.

Counterargument:

P1: Circus elephants provide enjoyment for humans.

P2: The treatment of circus elephants is not cruel.

P3: It is morally acceptable to use animals for human enjoyment provided that their treatment is not cruel.

C: Therefore it is morally acceptable to have elephants in circuses.

The main argument is your argument for your thesis.

This is the main argument in Standard Form.

The conclusion of your main argument is your thesis statement.

This is the counterargument in standard form, as indicated in the instructions.
The first premise of the counterargument is an obvious background fact. If people did not find elephants in circuses enjoyable, there would be no elephants in circuses. Circuses exist solely for entertainment. Anything not enjoyable would be dropped, especially something that requires as much money and labor as elephants.

The second premise hinges on the meaning of the word “cruel”. To be cruel is to intentionally inflict pain for the primary purpose of inflicting pain, or to inflict substantially more pain than is required for the desired result. Giving a vaccination shot to a child is not cruel, because it is not done for the purpose of inflicting pain and there is not a substantially less painful way to get the benefit. Similarly, the mere fact that elephants in circuses suffer to some degree does not mean they are treated cruelly, provided that suffering is not the goal and that they are not made to suffer more than is necessary for the intended purpose.

The third premise is supported by common practice. Meat, leather, milk, and other animal products are routinely used despite the fact that they require animals to suffer some pain. Working animals typically suffer various degrees of discomfort or pain, yet their use is not generally considered unethical if they are treated as well as possible given the goal. Of course it would be wrong to use humans in this way, but animals do not generally have the rights that humans do. Carl Cohen, for example, argues that rights come from an agreement between moral agents. He concludes that animals do not have rights because they cannot make such agreements.
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It is, of course, good to use scholarly sources to back up important points. (Cohen, 2001). While the suffering of animals is a consideration, it does not prohibit their use for the enjoyment of humans. So long as the use does not seek pain and suffering as part of the goal, and is carried out as humanely as possible, using animals for human enjoyment is morally acceptable.

The first sentence of each paragraph states the topic of the paragraph.

This counterargument is deductively valid - if all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must be as well. The third premise sets two conditions for the moral acceptability of having elephants in circuses. The first two premises state that both conditions are met. It follows absolutely then, that having elephants in circuses is morally acceptable, which is what the conclusion says.

The primary disagreement between the sides will likely rest on whether the treatment of elephants is cruel and unnecessary. Certainly, life as a circus elephant can involve pain and suffering, but so can life as a wild elephant. Furthermore, the intentional infliction of pain and suffering is not always wrong, for example, giving a medical shot. However, many would find the suffering inflicted by the confinement of

This part of your argument may not agree with your own position at all, but it is important to represent the argument as well as you can so that you demonstrate an appreciation of the best argument on the other side.

This demonstrates why the conclusion of the counterargument follows from the premises (as indicated in the instructions).

This paragraph presents a reasonable and fair discussion of the points of disagreement between the two sides (as indicated in the instructions).
elephants to be an infliction of suffering for a unnecessary purpose that does not justify the degree of suffering inflicted. These issues represent the main points of disagreement between the two sides.

The best objection to the original argument is probably aimed at the fourth premise. Posing such an objection would require looking at how elephants are actually treated and examining the degree to which elephants’ presence in circuses contributes to a further purpose.

For example, Ringling Bros. claims that circus elephants are guaranteed nutritious food, and prompt medical care, that their training provides a focus for their mental and physical abilities, and that they are allowed time for play and social interaction. “A positive, healthy environment is the foundation of training elephants” 

Therefore, the cornerstone of all circus elephant training at Ringling Bros. is reinforcement through praise, repetition, and reward” (elephantcenter, n.d.). If these claims are true, then it could be argued that their entertainment value to children and others might be sufficient to outweigh any suffering caused to the elephants in captivity.
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References
