The Ethics of Elephants in Circuses

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Annotated example for summative assessment
The recent announcement by Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey that the nation’s top circus would discontinue the use of elephants in its circuses by 2018 has brought joy to some and disappointment to others. It has also renewed an old ethical debate about the use of animals in circuses, a tradition that has been around for more than 200 years (Davis, 2015).

This paper will present a logical argument on one side of that debate, consider objections from the other side, and ultimately defend the position that the use of these highly intelligent beings in the circus is wrong.

My argument for this thesis goes as follows:

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.

Your English teacher may object if he or she sees your argument in non-paragraph form like this. However, logic teachers tend to love Standard Form because it makes your reasoning as clear as possible. In any case, presenting the argument for your thesis in Standard Form (with each premise and conclusion on a separate line) is a requirement of this particular (logic) paper.
THE ETHICS OF ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

This argument is **deductive, since it intends to derive its conclusion based upon the form of the reasoning used.** The fact that it is logically valid can be seen from the fact that the first and third premises lay out two conditions for the extreme confinement of elephants being wrong. Premises one and two state that those conditions are met, therefore the conclusion logically follows. Since the argument is valid, if all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must be as well. Let’s examine them one by one.

The first premise, that elephants are highly intelligent animals, is widely known by those who have studied them. Scientific studies have shown that they are able to independently discover novel methods to figure out how to retrieve food, and they have recently been shown to be able to enlist the help of other elephants in situations that require cooperation (Jabr, 2014).

The second premise, that putting elephants in circuses requires them to live their lives in extreme confinement, is a sad truth known to those who have investigated the matter. When not performing or being transported, circus elephants are kept on a short chain that prevents them from being able to move around or even lie down normally. **This is what is meant by ‘extreme confinement’:** captivity so severe that the animal is not able even to get proper exercise and stimulation. In addition to the captivity, there have been many reports, and footage, of abuse of circus elephants with bullhooks, electrocution, and other forms of cruelty (Nelson,
THE ETHICS OF ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

2011). However, in my argument, the extremity of the confinement alone is enough to entail that their use in circuses is wrong.

The third premise makes a strong moral claim, yet it can be defended: Given the intelligence of elephants, and given their natural use of vast savannahs of space, life spent on a tiny chain will naturally involve a tremendous amount of suffering. The stress of their confinement is so severe that they develop “stereotypic behaviors” such as constant swaying back and forth, indicating severe psychological distress (Wildlife Advocacy Project, n.d.). President of PAWS, Ed Stewart, expresses it well:

Elephants should not be in captivity – period ... The social structure isn’t correct, the space is not right, the climate is not right, the food is not right ... They are unbelievably intelligent. With all of that brainpower – to be as limited as they are in captivity – it’s a wonder they cope at all. In 20 years I hope we will look back and think, “Can you believe we ever kept those animals in cages?” (Jabr, 2014)

That level of suffering would seemingly require powerful justification.

The only remaining question in support of the premise may be whether animal suffering should count morally as human suffering does. In defense of the view that animal suffering requires justification, I would point out that philosophers on both sides of the animal ethics spectrum support a consideration of the basic welfare of animals. The prominent anti-animal rights philosopher Carl Cohen reasons:
THE ETHICS OF ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

Although animals do not have rights, it does not follow from this fact that one is free to treat them with callous disregard. It is silly to think of rats as the holders of moral rights, but it is by no means silly to recognize that rats can feel pain and that we have an obligation to refrain from torturing them because they are beings that have that capacity (Cohen, 2001).

Such a view agrees well with the reasoning of pro-animal philosopher Peter Singer who states, “If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (Singer, 1989). Suffering, by its nature, has negative value, and as each of these philosophers point out, the ethical relevance of suffering does not depend upon the species of the sufferer. Therefore, as the premise states, if animal suffering does not serve an important purpose that outweighs the suffering, we should conclude that it is unjustified and therefore wrong.

The final premise states that keeping elephants for circuses does not serve a purpose strong enough to outweigh the suffering involved. It is clear that many people across the nation enjoy the circus. However, how does their enjoyment compare against the suffering of the elephants? It should be noted that many circuses operate without the use of animals. Acrobats, clowns, and other human performers are capable of providing a riveting show without the captivity of animals. Given that the use of elephants only provides some added measure of entertainment value to some people perhaps once a year, and given the extreme suffering of intelligent animals from confinement all year, it does not appear that their added entertainment value outweighs the tremendous suffering inflicted on these highly intelligent beings.

Given the weight of the matter and its degree of controversy, it is important to consider the best arguments on the other side. In other words, why would an intelligent person disagree with this argument? The most common response is that elephants in
THE ETHICS OF ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

circuses are not badly mistreated.

This objection is in fact it is the primary response given by the circus itself. Their website, titled “Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Center for Elephant Conservation” refers to the Asian elephants as “pampered performers,” and states “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.). Furthermore, the site indicates,

“Elephants at Ringling Bros. Are stimulated by all the exciting activity around them, have time for play and social interaction with other animals, and have a chance to use their physical and mental skills every day.” If the animals are not mistreated and enjoy frequent stimulation, then it seems to follow that the objection is misplaced or at least exaggerated.

In response to the objection we have to consider whether the animals are allowed to roam free during the times in which they are not performing, or whether their days are mostly spent on short chains or in cramped transport vehicles. A year-long Mother Jones investigation of the very elephants used by Ringling Bros. showed that the latter is the case:

Ringling elephants spend most of their long lives either in chains or on trains, under constant threat of the bullhook, or ankus – the menacing tool used to control elephants. They are lame from balancing their 8,000-pound frames on tiny tubs and from being confined in cramped spaces, sometimes for days at a time. They are afflicted with tuberculosis and herpes, potentially deadly diseases rare in the wild and liked to captivity (Nelson, 2011).
THE ETHICS OF ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

This, combined with video footage of Ringling Bros. elephants in extreme captivity, shows that the animals, in fact, do undergo prolonged periods of extreme confinement and suffer as a result (Kelly RepublicansAgainstCruelty, 2013).

There are many important questions that remain to be answered, such as whether this reasoning also entails the wrongness of the confinement of other intelligent animals like orcas, dolphins, and chimpanzees. It is also a good question of whether the reasoning extends to farm animals raised in the extreme confinement of factory farms. This paper, however, has made a deductively sound case for a more modest conclusion: That the extreme confinement of elephants for mere entertainment is wrong.
REFERENCES


