

ARGUMENT FROM PERSONAL NARRATIVE: A CASE STUDY OF RACHEL MORAN'S *PAID FOR: MY JOURNEY THROUGH PROSTITUTION*

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Abstract: Personal narratives can let us in on aspects of reality which we have not experienced for ourselves, and are thus important sources for philosophical reflection. Yet a venerable tradition in mainstream philosophy has little room for arguments which rely on personal narrative, on the grounds that narratives are particular and testimonial, whereas philosophical arguments should be systematic and transparent. I argue that narrative arguments are an important form of philosophical argument. Their testimonial aspects witness to novel facets of reality, but their argumentative aspects help us to understand those facets for ourselves. My argument takes the form of a case study of the exemplary narrative argument penned by Rachel Moran, a former prostitute who uses her experiences to argue that prostitution amounts to sexual abuse. We'll see that narrative arguments can enjoy expository advantages over analytic ones.

1 Introduction

Rachel Moran's memoir *Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution* (2013) narrates how Moran entered prostitution, what she experienced there, and how she left. But first and foremost it is an argument. One of its main conclusions is that prostitution amounts to sexual abuse. Moran uses this conclusion to argue further that the "Nordic model" is the right way to legislate about prostitution: pimping and paying for sex should be criminalized, and prostituted people should be given opportunities to earn livings by other means.

Arguments from personal narratives are employed in such areas as public policy and advocacy.¹ The idea is for advocates and policymakers to understand the types of experience had by those they are trying to help, empower, or bring justice to, so as to form true beliefs about how best

¹ Meyers (2009), Code (2006). Harding (2004) explores their use in other areas too.

to do so. The underlying assumption is that listening to people's stories from their own viewpoints—and ideally in their own words—is often the best way to gain such understanding. This is especially so when the stories belong to marginalized people and feature aspects of reality that are foreign to the advocates or policymakers themselves.

Yet a venerable tradition in mainstream philosophy has little room for arguments from personal narrative, on the grounds that narratives are particular, anecdotal, and ambiguous, whereas philosophical premises should be universal, systematic, and clear. Brison (2002, 23) calls attention to this foundational quote from Bertrand Russell:

The free intellect will value more the abstract and universal knowledge into which the accidents of private history do not enter, than the knowledge brought by the senses, and dependent, as such knowledge must be, upon an exclusive and personal point of view and a body whose sense-organs distort as much as they reveal. (1969, 160)

Although philosophy has intuition pumps, which are stripped-down narratives, these are slotted within a systematic expository structure and supposed to be accessible to anyone with minimal imaginative expenditure (cf. Stump 2010, 23–26). Personal narratives, by contrast, are structured like stories and tend to describe events foreign to readers. Moreover, they are testimonial—and although belief on other people's say-so is necessary for life, it is not how philosophy is understood to work.²

But I argue that narrative arguments are an important form of philosophical argument. They occupy a middle ground between testimony and analytic reasoning, but are reducible to neither. Their narrative aspect testifies to the narrator's experience, so that someone who has undergone nothing like it can gain at least some sense of what it was like (to the extent that this is possible). But the narrator does not expect readers to rely on her word about the nature of her experience or about what conclusions to draw from it. The argumentative aspect of narrative arguments guides readers in understanding the experience, and others of the same type, for themselves. My study of Rachel Moran's narrative argument in *Paid For* shows how this works in one exemplary case.

I'll begin by distinguishing some characteristic features of narrative arguments (section 2). I'll then give an analytic schema of Moran's argument that prostitution amounts to sexual abuse (section 3). The purpose is in no sense to "reduce" her argument to an analytic structure, but to explore the epistemic relations between her story and the claims she uses it to advance. I want to show philosophers in analytic terms that a narrative argument can be philosophically respectable. But I also want to show philosophers, indirectly, that there are important expository features that an analytic presentation must omit. Section 4 discusses the way in which Moran's

² For an alternative perspective on moral beliefs, see Jones 1999.

narrative supports her premise and [section 5](#) discusses how this premise supports her conclusion. [Section 6](#) offers some concluding discussion about what narrative arguments can achieve over and above analytic ones, and on the importance of their being non-fictional.

I join a growing contingent of philosophers who are exploring the philosophical significance of narratives (see [Brison 2002](#), ch. 2; [Meyers 1993](#), 227–232; [Meyers 2009](#); [Code 2006](#); [Freedman 2006](#); [Stump 2010](#); [Harding 2004](#); [Nussbaum 1990](#); [Carroll 2002](#); [Currie 1995](#); [Goldie 2012](#)). My main aim is to understand and promote narrative argument as a philosophical form by appeal to a salutary example. But I would not have picked *Paid For* if I did not think it had much going for it. Thus, although I will not be arguing directly for Moran’s conclusion that prostitution is sexually abusive, my discussion of her narrative argument will support it.

2 Narrative Arguments

A narrative is a communication of connected events, fictitious or actual.³ Narratives can be used to advance arguments by giving readers epistemic access to certain types of experience that can expand their moral and conceptual perspectives ([Nussbaum 1990](#), [Stump 2010](#), [Carroll 2002](#), [Currie 1995](#), [John 1998](#), [section 6](#) of this paper). But narratives that are presented as true have a persuasive power beyond fiction, as [section 6.2](#) argues. Because of this, and because advocacy and public policy argue from true narratives ([Brison 2002](#); [Meyers 2009](#); [Harding 2004](#); and [Code 2006](#), ch. 5) the present discussion focuses on the latter. Unless otherwise specified, “narrative” will mean “narrative presented as true.”

A narrative argument can have multiple authors. On one common setup, a marginalized person who has had the experiences in question works with an advocate to articulate them, while the advocate draws out their implications for public policy.⁴ But such arguments might also be penned by a single author. Rachel Moran’s post-prostitution self, for instance, is advocating for current prostituted people as well as (in a sense) for her own prostituted past self. She wants to bring readers to understand her particular experience as being sexually abusive, and through this to understand that prostitution is a sexually abusive type of experience.

Narrative arguments contain three salient features. One is the conclusion, which distinguishes a narrative argument from a narrative *simpliciter*; the conclusions of interest here are philosophical.⁵ One sort of conclusion claims that a certain type of experience falls under a certain general

³ I am thinking of it here as the *product*, not the process, of narrating.

⁴ See [Code 2006](#), ch. 5; [Meyers 2009](#). With multi-author texts not every author need be a narrator, but this complication won’t concern us here. In discussing narratives presented as true, I will leave aside literary-critical quandaries about the relationship between the narrator and the author.

⁵ Narratives lacking explicit conclusions, perhaps because penned in haste or under duress, can still point toward conclusions or have morals; see [Meyers 2009](#).

category—such as Moran’s claim, to be discussed below, that prostitution experiences amount to sexual abuse. Another sort of conclusion pertains to the right thing to do given a certain understanding of that type of experience; Moran argues for the Nordic legislative model.

The second feature of a narrative argument, which I’ll call the *baseline narrative*, tells the story that is used to motivate the conclusion.⁶ The aim of the baseline narrative is to depict the narrator’s experience for unfamiliar readers. Since experiences unfold in time, the narrative format is better suited to depicting them than the systematic and a-temporal analytic format, as [section 6.1](#) argues. A baseline narrative is responsible to the facts, so it is important that the narrator do her best to select the events she depicts in an even-handed way, drawing out the aspects of her experience that are needed to support her conclusion without omitting details that would speak against it.

Third is what I’ll call the *narrative reflection*. This includes the narrator’s expository reflections on the baseline narrative and on the issues raised there, and it connects the (particular) baseline narrative with her (philosophical) conclusion. Narrative reflection can, but need not, contain explicitly deductive or probabilistic moves. The baseline narrative and narrative reflection are often (and in Moran’s case) woven into each other rather than presented as distinct.

Here is how argumentation and testimony come together in narrative arguments. It is in the spirit of argumentation that the narrative reflection guides the reader from the baseline narrative to the conclusion, enabling readers to follow her reasoning for themselves. But it is in the spirit of testimony that the narrator asserts that her baseline narrative occurred and selects which events to include and omit. The reasoning of a narrative argument can, like that of an analytic argument, be assessed on its own merit. Assessing the testimonial aspects of a narrative argument, by contrast, requires gauging the narrator’s sincerity and cognitive competence.

One way to explore a type of philosophical argument is to spend a whole paper surveying its general features. Another is to present an exemplar, such as a Gettier case for argument by counterexample. I’ll do the latter by turning to a study of the narrative argument presented by Moran in *Paid For*. General remarks follow in [section 6](#).

3 An Analytic Schema of Moran’s Narrative Argument

This section gives a schema of Moran’s narrative argument. The purpose is not to attempt the misguided task of reducing it to analytic form. I aim merely to distill the logical and evidential relations between Moran’s claims and the reasons she gives for them. I hope to show philosophers that an argument from personal narrative can be analytically watertight.

⁶ Meyers (2009) gives a breakdown of the components of a baseline narrative.

But I also hope to show philosophers, indirectly, some of the limitations of the analytic form when it comes to gaining philosophical insight from experiences that are very different from one's own. Hence, although my analytic presentation of Moran's reasoning does motivate her conclusion, readers (at least, those who have not been prostituted themselves) should expect to be persuaded in a different and more effective way by her memoir itself.

To begin, Moran's (2013) discussion is limited to cases (the majority) in which the prostituted person is a woman and the client is a man.⁷ Her description of prostitution can be expressed by the following constitutive rule:

The Constitutive Rule of Prostitution: In an act of prostitution, (i) the prostituted woman, in exchange for the client's payment, engages in specified sexual acts even if she does not desire them or is actively averse to them; (ii) both parties are aware that this is what she contracts to do;⁸ and (iii) the payment is the prostituted woman's reason for engaging in the acts, such that she would not do so without it.

Concerning (i) and (ii), Moran says that "[f]emale pleasure does not belong in prostitution, and both male and female participants intuitively understand that it has no place there" (166). Concerning (iii), "[m]oney was our wind-up mechanism. That is how we were controlled" (284).

Much of *Paid For* argues for this claim:

The Abuse Claim: Prostitution amounts to sexual abuse.⁹

It is tempting to read this as claiming that prostitution is *necessarily* abusive, where the necessity is conditional on the workings of human psychology—that is, on human cognition and behavior being as they actually are. Moran refers to acts of prostitution as "abnormal ways of interaction [which] cause human suffering" (233), where "abnormal" seems to mean psychologically unhealthy; and she attributes a fundamental discord between the notions of sex and of work to "human nature" (222).

But the Abuse Claim is not about psychological necessity. It is not even a universal generalization over all actual cases of prostitution. Although Moran says that all instances of prostitution which she has been acquainted with (either her own or her companions') amounted to sexual abuse, she does not exclude the actual or counterfactual possibility—in certain highly unusual circumstances—that an instance might lack certain abuse-making characteristics. For example, in commenting on the film *Pretty Woman*,

⁷ It also excludes trafficking, though Moran argues that there is a continuum between trafficking and non-trafficking cases (226–227).

⁸ This clause applies even when the acts involve feigning enjoyment (or even enjoyment itself, though Moran says that this is nearly unheard of (162)), for the client is still aware that the prostituted woman contracts to perform the act *regardless* of enjoyment.

⁹ This claim can be found throughout *Paid For*; see pages 112 and 294 for examples.

where a prostituted woman and her client fall in love, Moran says “I do not contend that that scenario is impossible, only that it is *highly* unlikely” (167–168), where we may assume that (genuine) love is incompatible with sexual abuse.

What she is claiming instead, I take it, is that an overwhelming majority of actual cases of prostitution, if not all of them, amounts to sexual abuse, and that so does a very large majority of counterfactual yet psychologically possible ones. Moreover, the more similar a counterfactual case of prostitution is to actuality, the smaller the chance that case stands of not being sexually abusive. Prostitution *itself* is sexually abusive, on this reading, because its constitutive rule is almost guaranteed to yield abuse in any psychologically possible instance.

Let’s summarize this interpretation of the Abuse Claim as follows, where the necessity is psychological:

The Near-Necessity Claim: Almost necessarily, instances of prostitution amount to sexual abuse.

Moran does not expect readers to see automatically how this can be. For she recognizes the steep learning curve faced by those who have never been prostituted: “What I am certain of is that the sexual humiliation of prostitutes is not simply underrated by many non-prostitutes (both men and women alike) but rather is unappreciated entirely;” with the result that “it is simply not understood” (110).

One of Moran’s strategies for advancing the Near-Necessity Claim is by induction from this premise:

The Particular Premise: My experiences in prostitution amounted to sexual abuse, and so did those of every other prostituted woman whose experiences I became acquainted with (101–119).

The link between the small set of instances countenanced by the Particular Premise and a claim spanning most if not all psychologically possible cases of prostitution is dialectically fragile. Potential counter-instances lurk (see [section 5](#)). Because the Near-Necessity Claim has room for actual and counterfactual exceptions, no single counter-instance can vitiate the induction to it from the Particular Premise—but a trend of counter-instances might. We’ll see that Moran’s argument for the induction is in part an attempt to defuse alleged counter-instances.

The Particular Premise might simply be believed on testimony, but Moran’s ambitions are greater: she wants readers to *understand why* it is true. Once we do this, we will—the thought goes—be in a position to apply the category of abuse to further actual and counterfactual cases of prostitution. And this will put us in a position to evaluate the induction to the Near-Necessity Claim by ourselves. For this induction gains in plausibility to the extent that Moran’s readers can see in the very concept of prostitution the near guarantee that its concrete applications will be abusive.

Understanding why instances of a type of thing belong to a certain category entails a sort of intellectual ability: the ability to perceive a relation between those instances and that category (Grimm 2010, 340–341).¹⁰ There are two salient ways to confer understanding. One is by analytic definition: a reader might come to grasp abstract and systematic definitions of the type of thing and of the category it is claimed to belong to. A second way to confer understanding is deictically: by showing the reader various instances of the type in various contexts, and pointing to the features which place the instances in the category in question. Consider the difference between using a botanical treatise to learn to recognize the poisonous mushrooms, as opposed to following a botanist through a forest. The deictic strategy comes into its own when firsthand experience of the type of thing is helpful for recognizing the features which place it in the category at issue. This strategy is arguably the better one when it comes to recognizing poisonous mushrooms, as well as for understanding the experience of non-mainstream people such as prostituted women.¹¹

Moran employs this deictic strategy. In the baseline narrative she describes many actual cases of prostitution, showing them in various lightings and from various angles. In the narrative reflection she points out the properties of those cases which (she claims) make them abusive. The hope is that readers acquire the ability to recognize abuse in novel and even counterfactual prostitution scenarios.

The following analytic discussion is like the botanical treatise; it distills from *Paid For* abstract descriptions of the abuse-making properties of prostitution, which is something. But it lacks the deictic input that will help us learn how to recognize those properties in concrete situations. What we will and won't get from my analytic presentation should convince philosophers that narrative arguments in general, and Moran's in particular, have much to recommend them.

4 The Particular Premise

This section discusses Moran's support for the Particular Premise. An initial question is why it needs support at all; isn't it cynical or vulgar not to take Moran's word for it that she and others were sexually abused? Not necessarily. Scrutinizing a story can affirm and protect its value (Brisson 2002, 34). Since some narratives are incompatible, a heuristic policy of taking all narratives at uncritical face value would have "the ultimate effect that no victimization claim can be taken seriously" (*ibid.*). Scrutiny of a

¹⁰ The understanding at issue here is factive, for if prostitution is not sexually abusive then Moran has mis-understood it.

¹¹ Stump (2010) uses a deictic strategy that draws on Biblical stories to confer understanding of how God can be believed good even in the face of extreme suffering; pages 371–374 summarize her methodology.

narrative can stem from the desire to take it as seriously as you responsibly can.

A motivation for the Particular Premise must support two of its entailments: first, that Moran and her acquaintances had the experiences she describes; second, that sexual abusiveness can appropriately be ascribed to those experiences. Let's look at each claim.

4.1 Trustworthiness of the Narrative

For the first claim, readers are reliant on Moran's testimony. Yet [Code \(2006, 176\)](#) points out that, when a narrator's aim is to advance a conclusion, one might worry about her "spinning" her story at the expense of accuracy (cf. [Goldie 2012, 157](#)). Spin need not be malicious—it can be motivated by a genuine desire to help those you are advocating for. But the threat of it could undermine the Particular Premise.

One might absolve Moran from this worry by arguing that there can hardly be a reasonable motivation to fabricate a story the telling of which makes the narrator so vulnerable.¹² Indeed, this consideration should dispose us to trust Moran for general claims, such as that she was prostituted. But—unfortunately—it is less relevant to trusting her for the particular prostitution experiences that she narrates. If anything, public scrutiny gives people a *stronger* motivation to show themselves in a flattering or compassion-worthy light. This reason for skepticism, however, must be balanced against the fact that Moran comes from a marginalized group. Non-prostituted readers should recognize how likely they are to harbor biases (including implicit ones) against the prostituted and otherwise marginalized, and should strongly consider compensating by adjusting their credences in favor of the latter's testimony ([Fricker 2007](#), [Holroyd 2012](#), [Saul 2013](#)).

Given these competing considerations about gauging Moran's sincerity, positive reasons to trust can only benefit her argument. Moran realizes this and buttresses her claim to sincerity. One way in which she does this is by noting her decision (made with much agonizing) not to write under a pseudonym: "[h]ow could I consider my account truthful if it were stamped on the cover page with a name that was not my own? Would I not have been guilty of presenting its readers with a dishonesty before they'd even opened the first page?" ([Moran 2013, 10](#)). This is no appeal to the fact of her vulnerability as a reason to believe her. Rather, Moran is taking a stand by her testimony, staking her honor and her name on the truth of her words. But she is also giving readers as many of the tools as she is morally permitted (short of violating the privacy of companions still in prostitution) to investigate her as a believable source for themselves. In doing these things Moran is availing herself of both the testimonial and argumentative features of the narrative-argument form.

¹² I owe this point to [Freedman 2015](#).

Brison calls our attention to another issue arising in evaluating a narrator's trustworthiness (2002, 30). This pertains not to deliberate but *inadvertent* inaccuracy, arising in a narrator's memories. The vicissitudes of memory are notorious,¹³ since memories are strongly influenced by our current beliefs, affects, and concepts. One might worry that Moran's cognitive processes, guided by her current views about the abusiveness of prostitution, may have built inaccurate details into her memories that support an ascription of abusiveness.¹⁴

It must be acknowledged that surprising things can be misremembered (Chabris and Simons 2010, chapter 2). Yet a "guilty-until-proven-innocent" attitude toward Moran's memory is unwarranted, for she is drawing on a vast manifold of memories from almost a decade's worth of events. And she does what she can to show readers that she tried hard to be responsible as a witness to her past. She says for example that writing *Paid For* "was a long, slow and painful process" (291); "I had to understand [what had happened to me], and to do so I had to fully remember. I had to open the door on a lot of things I really didn't want to" (270). Moran's sharing the difficulty of the introspective process while assuring us of her prioritizing the truth is helpful, especially given that other resources for counteracting potential defeaters to memory are limited. As we saw, she is for example morally bound to maintain confidentiality about other prostituted women who might have served as corroborating witnesses.

Moreover, we must not be distracted from the epistemic *benefits* of remembering from a temporal distance. Particularly when the remembered experience is of the psychological order of abuse, a person might not in the moment experience the full force of emotions appropriate to it. Yet emotions are keys to moral dimensions of reality (Nussbaum 1990, Currie 1995, Carroll 2002, and section 6), so suppressing them will hamper a person in understanding her experience when it occurs. Only much later, with time to process the experience, do appropriate and revealing emotions have the chance to develop (Freedman 2006; Goldie 2012, 55). Moran says that, after leaving prostitution:

I began to interpret my prostitution abuse on an intellectual, as well as a deep, personal level. This was a new way of understanding . . . ; being able to decode and comprehend [prostitution's] structure and the way it operates is to reach an understanding of its dynamics on a level that both terrifies and saddens in an altogether new way. (280)

Moran provides the tools to see how her reflections stand a good chance of accuracy—even greater accuracy than her experiences in the moment.

¹³ For a survey see Chabris and Simons 2010, ch. 2.

¹⁴ Some go as far as to argue that for this reason there can be no autobiographical truth whatsoever. Lamarque (2004) addresses this rather postmodern objection (cf. Goldie 2012, 154–155).

4.2 Ascribing Abusiveness to Moran's Experiences

Let's look at the second claim entailed by the Particular Premise—that abusiveness is the correct ascription for Moran's and her colleagues' prostitution experiences. Here is where the analytic form is at a special disadvantage. Moran's baseline narrative portrays various events to which she applies the concept of sexual abuse. Without this virtual "seeing" of abusiveness in various contexts, readers of an analytic presentation are left only with a conceptual discussion which, given their own experiences and background beliefs, they may or may not find plausible.

In order to support the ascription of abusiveness to her experiences, Moran's first move is to note that it is conceptually possible for a prostituted woman to be sexually abused. This needs to be pointed out, she says, because many people suppose that, in renting your body to another person, you temporarily relinquish your say over what happens to it. "The traditional view of abuse victims is one of people who in no way solicit their abuse"; hence prostituted women, "by way of our 'profession,' are unable to lay claim to our experiences of having been abused" (107). Yet in fact, Moran says, prostituted women state in advance of the act what they are willing and unwilling to do, and in spite of this "[o]ften a man would molest a woman in exactly the way he knew she least wanted to be molested, to maximize his own sadistic pleasure" (174). Any sexual-boundary violation constitutes abuse.

But Moran goes further and claims that a sexual act can be abusive even when the prostituted woman permits it. Moran gives four reasons for thinking this, each drawn from experiences in which clients did only what they were permitted. First, even in such cases, prostituting herself simply felt like abuse: "I felt the same sickening nausea and rising panic that is inherent to conventional sexual abuse in each prostitution experience I ever had, *and I felt that regardless of whether or not a man stayed within the agreed sexual boundaries*" (112).

Second, even in such cases, Moran and other women had to regularly perform psychological contortions while prostituting themselves, such as extreme dissociation (chapter 13). "It is clear to me," she notes, "that when a person needs to practice and perfect a state of mental lock-down (as prostitutes so commonly do) in order to stand the sexual acts they are enduring, that person is being abused" (110).

Whereas the first two reasons pertain to Moran's and others' feelings while prostituting themselves, the third and fourth touch on things that one might only be peripherally aware of in the moment or even fail to notice at all until much later. Third: The abovementioned dissociation, she says, does not cease once a client has gone; rather, "[o]ver time it becomes second-nature," resulting in an "unnatural separation of self" (143); "it was true for me in prostitution and I saw it everywhere I looked" (143).

The fourth reason why even permitted sexual acts in prostitution can be (and indeed are) abusive is that the broader effects of performing them match the effects of more “conventional” forms of sexual abuse:

humiliation on a sexual level does not contain itself within the sphere of the sexual; it leaks out all over a life, most particularly so if it is repetitive and ritualistic. Drug and alcohol addiction, the annihilation of confidence, the shattering of self-worth, physical self-harm, suicidal ideation; all of these are well-recognized as the ‘fruits’ of sexual abuse. All of these I have seen in abundance in prostitution. (110)

These four reasons support an ascription of abusiveness to Moran’s experiences in prostitution, including to experiences that she permitted. These reasons draw on what Moran and her companions were aware of while prostituting themselves, and on what happened to their bodies and minds as a result. Because of this, it will be easier to see how these reasons support the Particular Premise if one has something closer to a phenomenal grasp of what those experiences were like from Moran’s or her companions’ point of view—and a narrative can bring us much closer to this than an analytic argument can.

5 The Near-Necessity Claim

The Particular Premise provides an inductive basis for the Near-Necessity Claim. In the classic case of induction, a collection of particular claims (say, that *that* swan is white, that that other swan is white, and so forth) is used as a basis from which to draw the general conclusion that all swans are white. A sighting of a non-white swan falsifies this general claim, but it does not falsify the less general claim that *most* swans are white.

The Near-Necessity Claim is like the claim that most swans are white. It does not generalize over all cases of prostitution, either actual or psychologically possible. Because of this, a small number of counter-instances—that is, situations in which prostitution is not sexually abusive—will not falsify it. A sizeable trend of disconfirming instances, however, may falsify it. Hence the better a case Moran’s opponents can make for the existence or psychological possibility of a trend of counter-instances (even if the factors making these instances non-abusive were sadly absent for Moran and her companions), the closer they will come to falsifying the Near-Necessity Claim—that is, the closer they will come to showing that it is not prostitution *as such* which is (almost necessarily) sexually abusive.

One sort of counter-instance is actual: a trend of non-abusive cases of prostitution that have actually occurred. The other sort is counterfactual but psychologically possible. The next two sections discuss Moran’s

responses to actual and counterfactual apparent counter-instances, respectively. Her responses draw on her story to give a fuller picture of sexual abuse in prostitution than we've seen so far. Once again, my analytic presentation is skeletal by comparison.

5.1 Actual Purported Counter-Instances

Moran expects some current and former prostituted women—perhaps enough to constitute a falsifying trend—to deny that their experiences amounted to sexual abuse: “[t]here will be prostitutes out there who will not like the sound of this. . . . I am certain of it because I would not have liked the sound of it myself. . . . I’m sure also that there’ll be some former prostitutes who’ll not appreciate it either” (111). Such women will deny, for example, that they mentally dissociate or feel out of control with clients.

What we have is a situation of the sort envisaged by [Brison \(2002\)](#)—(see [section 4.1](#)), in which multiple private stories describe the same type of event in incompatible general terms, challenging the claim that that type of event is relevantly similar for all or most who experience it. Here the burden of proof is on Moran, for her claim covers her own experiences *and* her interlocutors’, whereas the latter’s covers only their own. This situation calls to mind Brison’s caution against overgeneralizing from one’s own case (2002, 29).

Moran does two things to defuse these actual purported counterexamples. First, she presents an error theory for her interlocutors, arguing that self-deception about their own experience is to be expected: “[s]urviving in prostitution is not possible for those who have a consistent, consciously held view of the self as vulnerable. It is necessary to lie to yourself here” (131). Because of this, “[t]here is a fantasy some women in prostitution indulge in: that they are exceptionally strong, in control of all of this, *far* above being abused” (111). This error theory does not show that benign experiences of prostitution *never* occur. But it provides a sensible alternative explanation for the appearance of such cases, both to outsiders and to the women concerned.

How are non-prostituted readers to adjudicate between the other women’s denial of having been abused, on the one hand, and Moran’s explanation for their likely self-deceit, on the other? From the outside, all we can do is gauge their respective trustworthiness as testifiers. It would help if we had some means to assess the plausibility of these competing claims on their own merit. This is where Moran’s baseline narrative comes in once more. Note that it is against the backdrop of our own experiences that we gauge the plausibility of a claim. A narrative can provide a “virtual” experience of what prostitution might to some extent be like. Hence, Moran’s baseline narrative might help us understand why abusiveness is by far the rule and not the exception in prostitution (if this is so), and why it

makes psychological sense to deny that one is undergoing it. Yet without a baseline narrative to provide the raw phenomenal material, as readers and philosophers we are epistemically hobbled.

5.2 Counterfactual Purported Counter-Instances

Some think that if only the world were different in certain respects, then prostitution would not be damaging to prostituted women (Shrage 1989, Ericsson 1980). In such cases, goes the objection, it would not be abusive either. If this is so, then, in counterfactual worlds which are different in the respects at issue, we might have a non-abusive trend of psychologically possible cases of prostitution. The more cases this trend encompasses, and the closer they are to the actual world, the better a chance they have of falsifying the Near-Necessity Claim. Consider the following counterfactual scenario:

The Normalization Scenario: Prostitution is considered completely normal. There is no social stigma attached to it; it is regarded like any other job, so that having “sex worker” on your CV poses no hindrance to a post-prostitution career. Social programs ensure that prostituted women can receive training for other jobs if they wish. Robust security creates a strong incentive for clients not to breach prostituted women’s stated sexual boundaries.

Why do the objectors think that normalized prostitution would tend not to be abusive? Because the differing social constitution of prostitution, they assert, will alter the experiences of clients and prostituted women alike.

Clients will conceptualize interactions with prostituted women as the receipt of a valued service, not as demeaning them; this will incline them against behaving demeaningly. As for the prostituted woman, she will mentally represent interactions with clients in terms of concepts related to professionalism, not violation or humiliation. Granted, because she is still performing sexual acts to serve another, she won’t be “fram[ing] the boundaries of her sexual experience” (Moran 2013, 112). But this will not feel abusive, because her clients will uphold her dignity throughout, buffering her against the sort of humiliation wreaked by sexual trauma.

Some objectors maintain that the Normalization Scenario is close enough to actuality that it can be brought about merely through legislation and campaigning for different social attitudes (Ericsson 1980). If this is so, then it could pose a serious threat to the Near-Necessity Claim.

Moran (2013) responds by arguing that prostitution, despite its re-vamped social constitution, still amounts to abuse in the Normalization Scenario. *Pace* the objector’s optimistic forecasts, normalization will not “take what is wrong about prostitution and somehow make it right” (218). The constraints of human psychology ensure that prostitution will remain abusive in the vast majority of cases.

To see why, we must dig deeper into what Moran takes to be abusive about prostitution. Here again we lose out by lacking the insider view provided by her narrative portrayal. But let's say what we can. Abuse is a "mis-use" of something in a way that tends to damage it,¹⁵ and sexual abuse is a damaging "mis-use" of persons in a sexual capacity. To see why Moran takes prostitution to fit this description even in the Normalization Scenario, recall the Constitutive Rule: the prostituted woman, in exchange for the client's payment (and for no other reason), engages in sexual acts even if she does not desire them or is actively averse to them, such that both parties are aware that this is going on and that the other is aware of it. Note that the word "sexual" makes all the difference. Altering the type of act and the actors yields many acts that are not abusive. For example, a child, in exchange for dessert (and for no other reason), eats his Brussels sprouts even if he does not desire them or is actively averse to them, such that both he and his parent are aware that this is going on and that the other is aware of it. Why do specifically sexual acts with this structure make for abuse, whereas sprout-eating acts generally don't?

Moran's answer, I take it, is that sexual acts involve the whole of the self—psychological and physical—in an intense and *sui generis* way. Because of this, an act of prostitution does a deep and *sui generis* sort of violence to her very person. There are two aspects to this violence. First, having one's sexual aversions realized is violating in and of itself; narratives in which this occurs can drive this point home in a way that abstract reflection cannot. Second, having one's sexual aversions realized in a context deliberately structured so that the other party can ignore this amounts to a denial of one's personhood. A prostituted woman "is treated like a blow-up sex doll come to life" (105); "[i]n prostitution, men dehumanize women and women dehumanize themselves in order to be able to perform the acts men require of them" (181). This interpersonal element too can be better portrayed through narrative descriptions than conceptual elucidation.¹⁶

Both of these aspects of violence to a prostituted woman's person—the realizing of her aversions and the disregard of this—are psycho-physical. The flesh-on-flesh ignoring of her subjectivity gives the lie to external socially constituted conceptions. Both the prostituted woman and her clients know that she is "there for one reason and one reason only—so that [her] body would be used as a receptacle for their sperm" (91). Because of this, prostituted women will still experience interactions with clients as shameful—not because society says it is but because "shame is simply an inevitable response" (118) to dehumanization. Even if society approves of prostitution, "[t]he semen is the fly in the ointment" (222). If anything, prostituted women will be worse off in the Normalization Scenario. A social conception of prostitution that diverges so drastically from their own

¹⁵ Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, March 2016, especially entries 2(a) and 6(b).

¹⁶ But see [Estes 2001](#), whose argument makes a similar case in purely analytic terms. See also [Pateman 1983](#).

experience will leave them without the concepts to articulate this jarring disjunct (107).¹⁷

As for the client's viewpoint, regardless of his socially constituted conception of prostitution, buying sex will not be like paying for any other service, because to avail himself of it there is person whom he has to dehumanize (102).

In order for the Normalization Scenario to have a shot at being non-abusive, sexual acts themselves—not just sexual acts in prostitution—would need an entirely different socially constituted meaning that divorces them from the whole of the person. Is such a world psychologically possible? This is doubtful, because psychology is determined not just by society but by biology, and there are good evolutionary reasons to think that emotional bonding is built into healthy human sexual relations and psychological fragmentation into unhealthy ones. Yet even if this scenario is within the remit of psychology, it is so drastically far from the actual world as to not pose much of a challenge to the Near-Necessity Claim.

Once more, the plausibility we ascribe to these conceptual reflections depends partly on our experiences and background beliefs, so the non-prostituted among us who lack the virtual-experiential aid of a narrative are in an epistemically impoverished position. This is the difference that a narrative portrayal of prostitution is in a better position to make than an analytic discussion.

6 The Expository Strengths of Factual Narratives

My analytic presentation has shown how Moran's case for the Abuse Claim hangs together logically and evidentially, and I hope that this shows the potential for narrative arguments to be philosophically rigorous. I hope also to have conveyed understanding, in the deictic manner of appealing to exemplars, of why narrative arguments are better suited than analytic ones to expositing claims about experiences very different from readers' own. I'll finish by providing a more systematic motivation for this claim, in response to two objections.

6.1 The Expository Advantages of Narrative

The first objection grants that particularized testimony promotes understanding of certain types of experience better than systematic argumentation does. But it says that little seems to be won by presenting this testimony in narrative form. Surely we could just as easily slot a selection of testimonial anecdotes into a series of systematically arranged points. We would still be availing ourselves of the narrative, while maintaining the philosophically tried-and-true analytic structure.

¹⁷ The result will be what [Fricker \(2007\)](#) calls a "hermeneutical injustice" (chapter 7).

In response, we may grant that narratives are often fruitfully used in systematic contexts as examples or intuition pumps. But in a work whose overall structure is narrative rather than systematic, they can do more (Stump 2010, part 1 and 371–374). To see this, note that experiences do not occur in isolation; rather, they are framed before and after by other experiences. These framing experiences are part of what gives the framed experiences their phenomenal character and psychological significance. A decontextualized anecdote will be much less able than a contextualized story to faithfully communicate an experience.¹⁸ Narrative argument enjoys at least two expository advantages over an analytically structured argument.

One is that it is more conducive than an analytic argument to helping readers perceive moral properties. A sense of progression from one experience to another, where each experience is infused with the significance of the previous one, can help readers to imaginatively simulate an experience had by the character, or an experience of being present in the story (Walton 1978).¹⁹ Such simulated experiences will tend to have emotional components, such as empathy with the character, or emotions of one's own, such as compassion or outrage, directed at the character.²⁰ These emotions can enhance our moral perception (Nussbaum 1990, Currie 1995, Carroll 2002, Stump 2010). Feeling empathy or compassion toward a character, for instance, can attune us to an injustice which she experiences and which we might otherwise have mislabeled. Moreover, our emotional receptivity commonly *shuts down* when we follow systematic logical or probabilistic chains of reasoning,²¹ arguably with predictable effects on our moral perception.

Another expository advantage of the narrative form is this: narrative's ability to elicit emotions gives it an edge in encouraging readers to engage in drawn-out conceptual reflection. If we care about a character, we will tend to want to do her justice in interpreting her actions; and if we care about what happens, we will tend to want to understand how individual events link up within a plot. This affect-driven interest can sustain us through reflection that we might otherwise be less motivated to pursue (John 1998, 343–344). Insofar as a person must work through an argument in order to be persuaded by it, an argument with built-in elements motivating readers to do so enters the world with an expository advantage.

But the objector might also worry about the whole idea of using affective engagement to discern truths at all. For affections can cloud as much

¹⁸ Stump (2010) goes as far as to argue that dissecting stories and pinning their parts under systematic headings “undermin[es] the whole point of introducing stories into philosophical reflection” (373).

¹⁹ Stump (2010, ch. 4) argues that there is a kind of second-person experience that *only* narratives are in a position to relate.

²⁰ With Gendler and Kovakovich (2005), I think that fiction-directed affective attitudes are genuine emotions, but little hangs on this point; Walton's (1978) “quasi-emotion” (6) would serve too. For further discussion see the contributions to Nichols 2006.

²¹ For discussion see Kahneman 2011, part 1.

as reveal—think of the parent unable to perceive the evil in his child’s criminal act. In response, we may note that narrative arguments are no more inherently obfuscating than analytic ones; apparently valid deductions can hide ruinous errors in otherwise impressive technicality. The moral is that we must engage responsibly with any philosophical argument, whether analytic or narrative.

6.2 The Expository Advantages of Fact over Fiction

Proponents of fiction may object, too: Why think that factual narrative arguments enjoy any advantages over otherwise identical fictional ones, given that the same storytelling facility is employed by both? I’ll discuss three reasons.

First, factual narratives have an advantage over fictional ones when it comes to supporting inductive arguments. A claim such as “in the fiction, the character’s prostitution experience was abusive” can only support an induction to a general claim that prostitution is abusive in the fictional world. A claim such as “the character’s prostitution experience was in fact abusive,” by contrast, can (as we’ve seen) support an induction to a general claim about the non-fictional world.

Second, although both factual and fictional narratives can convey conceptual understanding, factual narratives can do so more directly. To see why, note that concepts themselves can be employed in make-believe mode: their extensions in a fictional world might not pass muster were they actual. For example, “the savvy, insightful [fictional] detective frequently does things that in real life no sensible person would do (e.g., trusting people one has only reason to mistrust, putting oneself in danger unnecessarily), but this does not count against the detective’s intelligence” (John 1998, 341). Thus, before we are entitled to take a work of fiction to have conveyed conceptual understanding, we must take the interpretive step of asking whether the concept’s domain of application is itself one of the things the work presents as make-believe.²² We make such interpretive judgments all the time, indeed accurately. But the very fact that this step is necessary with fiction and not fact puts an expository detour on the way to gaining conceptual understanding through fictional narratives. Moreover, there is no pressure on the reader of fiction to traverse this detour; it is perfectly acceptable to immerse oneself in the fiction without connecting it to reality. Factual narratives, by contrast, are a form of testimony and hence come

²² Lamarque and Olsen (1994, ch. 15) go as far as to claim that it is inappropriate to take fiction as providing conceptual understanding at all. But this conclusion is too extreme (John 1998). In order for make-believe to be both comprehensible and enjoyable, there must be at least some overlap with reality—particularly in the concepts a narrative employs. And there are much-discussed limitations on fiction’s ability to credibly present concepts, particularly moral ones, as fictional; see Walton 2008.

with a doxastic imperative. If we have reason to trust the narrator, then we arguably *should* take her concepts as applying to reality.

The third expository advantage of factual over fictional narratives is that the former can be even more effective than the latter at enabling accurate moral perception of the narrated situations. This reason is that our emotions are what enable our moral perception (as I've argued), and there are differences in the emotions we tend to experience toward fact as opposed to fiction. Consider as an example the emotional state of a person reading a fictional emergency-room resuscitation drama in which the patient ultimately dies, as opposed to the reader's state when the same words are presented as fact (e.g., in a feature essay in the Sunday paper). At least two factors make for a difference in the reader's emotions, and thus her moral perceptions, in each case.

First, there is a greater metaphysical distance between a reader and a fictional as opposed to a factual situation. To see what I mean, consider first that person-directed emotions come more easily, all else equal, to the extent that the person or situation they are directed at is close to oneself in one way or another. It is natural, for example, to feel greater and more nuanced emotion toward people suffering in our own country and time than toward those in other countries or past or future times. Another form of closeness that facilitates emotions is *metaphysical*. A factual character is separated from the reader by mere space and time. A fictional one, by contrast, is separated also by a dearth of causal chains or geographical terrain which, however tenuously, could link the reader to her. Like other forms of distance, this greater metaphysical distance has a dampening effect on our emotions toward a character or situation²³—and thus on our moral perception of the situation being narrated.

Second, the emotions we experience toward narrated characters or events are influenced by our other states and attitudes, and we have different attitudes when we engage with fact than when we engage with fiction.²⁴ For instance, when engaging with fact we (often) believe that the story is true. We may also believe that it is inappropriate to use a true story for purposes common to consuming fiction, such as mere enjoyment or mere emotional catharsis; we might also be uncomfortable with the prospect of doing so. Together, our beliefs and attitudes may hold our story-directed emotions to account, so that our emotional responses to (say) a factual story of suffering contain a dose of the gravity appropriate to real life. Because our fact-directed emotions are conditioned by belief and other reality-responsive attitudes, it is likely that they are at least somewhat more

²³ We might of course feel more strongly about a fictional character who, because of the kind of experiences she undergoes, is more psychologically close to us, than toward a factual character utterly unlike ourselves. This is consistent with my point, which is *ceteris paribus*. We would feel still stronger emotions toward the character resembling us if she were factual.

²⁴ See Walton 1978 and Lamarque and Olsen 1994 for accounts of these differences.

appropriate to the situation being narrated; thus, that the moral perception they enable is somewhat more accurate to reality.

7 Conclusion

I hope that my exploration of *Paid For* has made a good case that philosophers have much to gain by overcoming disciplinary prejudices against so-called “anecdotes” and recognizing that narrative arguments provide an important way of forming reasoned opinions about the world. Narrative arguments enable us to draw on experiences that are very different to our own, and hence have the potential to reveal very different aspects of reality from those with which we are familiar.

I have argued that narrative arguments have a *sui generis* expository force. This force differs from that of testimony, because the reader is able to follow their reasoning and acquire understanding over and above mere belief. And it differs from that of analytic argumentation, because of the deictic way in which the narrative form can provide understanding and acquaint us with a person who lived what we are coming to understand. Moreover, arguments from factual narratives enjoy expository advantages over arguments from fictional ones.

Finally, I hope to have shown—insofar as an analytic presentation can—that Moran’s *Paid For* has a lot going for it as an exemplar of narrative arguments, and that her conclusion that prostitution amounts to sexual abuse is therefore worth taking seriously.

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