

## Festival of Ideas

### Clare Chambers in conversation with Julian Baggini

**Julian Baggini:** Hello, and welcome to this latest addition to the Bristol Ideas online series, conversations with authors, writers and thinkers about things that really matter today. I'm Julian Baggini and I'm a philosopher and writer, and I'm delighted today to be in conversation with Clare Chambers, Professor of Political Philosophy and a fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge. She specialises in feminism, bioethics, contemporary liberalism and theories of social justice. Her previous books include the acclaimed *Against Marriage*. Her latest book is *Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body*. This is a concept which we're going to unpick away. But it's very, very interesting if you think about our society and satisfaction with bodies and what we do to modify them, a couple of statistics really leapt out at me from the book. One is that, according to one survey which is not at all untypical, 46 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women report feeling ashamed how they look in the mirror, I mean actually ashamed, an astonishing number. And if you think about the things people do to change their bodies, for example, steroid use amongst bodybuilders, well, since steroid use became typical in the bodybuilding world, the average life expectancy of Mr America winners has become 53, which is astonishing for people who are otherwise fit and healthy people. So what is the unmodified body? Why do we need to speak in defence of it? We're going to explore some of those issues and related ones in the next 45 minutes. So hello, and welcome, Clare.

**Clare:** Hello, lovely to be here. Thank you.

**Julian:** Well, let's begin. Can we sum up what the core principle, if you like, of the unmodified body is in maybe just even one sentence, or maybe a sentence and then a few footnotes?

**Clare:** Absolutely, yes. Well, I'm pleased that you described the unmodified body as a principle, because it is a principle rather than a literal thing. The unmodified body is a body that is allowed to be OK just as it is. So it's a body that we allow to be good enough, just as it is. And why do I say that's a principle not a literal thing? Well, of course, the minute you start to think about body modification, we really quickly realise that everything we do all the time modifies our body in some way, subtle or less subtle. The fact that we are now sitting down, having this conversation rather than going for a run, means that our bodies are ever so slightly different than they would have been had we done that. Every time you eat, drink, sleep, don't sleep, we slightly change our bodies. So the argument here is not that we should think of the unmodified body as a literal thing, a body that has never been changed, but rather a body that's allowed to be OK. And the reason that's important is because, as you picked out in your opening remarks, there are so many pressures on us to reject that idea, to feel that our bodies are not good enough just as they are. And we are living in a time where psychologists diagnose an epidemic of appearance anxiety, and some of the statistics you picked out at the beginning are evidence of that.

**Julian:** It's interesting, the formulation very carefully says 'good enough, just as it is'. There are certain trends now around what's called body positivity, to say they're not just good enough as it is, we're all beautiful, we're all beautiful as we are. Now you don't push that far. Is there a reason why it

might be problematic to actually make that extra even more affirmative step?

**Clare:** I think the body positivity movement is generally a very good thing, and it may well be a necessary counterbalance to the myriad pressures to feel that our bodies are never good enough. And I talk about lots of different ways that that happens in the book – where that happens in the sphere of beauty, of fitness, of disability, and health and ageing and so on, lots and lots of examples of that. It may well be that we need body positivity to kind of counter that. But I don't think that body positivity is a great goal in and of itself because it can just become yet another way to fail. We might feel that we fail in that our bodies don't meet the standards we and culture set for them, but also we fail if we don't love our bodies enough, so there can kind of be shame upon shame upon shame. And again, the body positivity movement has, as with so many things, been taken up by some of the beauty products and companies themselves. I discuss in the book the example of Dove, a very major producer of beauty products and creams and so on, which has taken the body positivity movement on board and has used it in some of his advertising campaigns. And I think often it has done that in ways that are perhaps better than the old-fashioned campaigns that only emphasise perfection, but nevertheless still presents us with images of bodies which are broadly within certain parameters, that fit certain restricted kind of categories of shapes, size, age, levels of blemish and wrinkle and so on, and again, just present us with another way in which we can fail to meet the standards set for us.

**Julian:** Body modification comes in many forms – permanent, temporary, cosmetic, whatever it might be. And I think it's probably true to say that in a

country like ours, the United Kingdom, now it's with younger men but also traditionally much more women, body modification is very much something that people do and they choose to do. Whether it's hair, tans, even if it's not things like Botox or anything like that far. And I suppose the first sort of thing that someone might say in idea of this unmodified body is, well, my body, my choice, what's a philosopher here got anything to say about whether we should or should not modify our bodies, isn't it just a matter of personal choice?

**Clare:** Choice is very important and in general, I do defend the idea that we have the right to choose to modify our bodies or to choose to try to modify our bodies if we want to. We generally do have the right to choose what happens to us in matters that concern primarily ourselves, a standard kind of principle of liberal philosophy, people like John Stuart Mill and many others. So I endorse that. I'm not going to say that people should not have the right to choose what happens to their bodies. But I do think that choice is not the end of the story, philosophically or politically. And the reason why is that our choices take place necessarily within a context. We choose within a social context that firstly provides options for us, tells us what we can and can't do, what's available for us to do. And secondly tells us what is good for us, or what's good for people like us, what kinds of choices will get us status or advantage or happiness and satisfaction. And you can see all of this social pressure very clearly in the example of our bodies. The very fact that there are so many different procedures available for us to choose to modify our bodies, that the cosmetic surgery industry, and the beauty practices industry, is finding ever more body parts that it could put forward as subject to potential sculpting, shaping, tweaking, the fact that perhaps ten years ago, nobody would really have thought about having their labia or their buttocks

trimmed or enlarged, that there are new products coming up on the market all the time. We're constantly being presented with new procedures, new diets, new exercise regimes, which give us that sense that these are ways in which we ought to be thinking about our bodies changing. Our choices to participate in those practices are shaped by the commercial advertising and the availability of those practices. And we are also choosing within a context that tells us and shows us that different choices have different payoffs, that choosing some things will get us advantages and choosing others will get us disadvantages. We don't choose to live in a society which associates beauty and certain kinds of appearance with certain kinds of success, or with virtue, or with certain characteristics of our personality. We don't choose that how our bodies look should be judged so constantly. We don't choose to live in a society where we have a really strong emphasis on visual culture, on selfie culture and ranking all the time. We're making choices within that context. My argument really is to say we should look at that social context, look at the ways in which it is harmful, in which it is encouraging all of us to feel shame and anxiety about our bodies, even when our bodies are perfectly functioning and just completely within expected parameters of human bodies. And it's that damage and that harm of the social context that means that how we choose to act within it is not the end of the story.

**Julian:** The book is very much not sort of wagging its finger or hectoring the reader about what they individually should be doing about their appearance. And you say that the unmodified body is a political principle and is a political principle against the pressure to modify. So I can see that. But what's the what's the relationship here between the personal and the political? Because clearly, if refusing to conform to these pressures to modify is a kind of act of political resistance, then presumably if you don't do that then you're failing

to resist this oppression in some way. How would you like individuals to respond to this argument?

**Clare:** I think the question of how individuals should react to the context of social injustice is an enormously difficult question for all kinds of accounts of injustice, not just for mine. And there's a real problem with recognising two things, which I think are both true at the same time. One thing that is true is that what individuals do makes a difference. When we participate or don't participate in practices of modification, the way we present our bodies and so on, that makes a difference to how others see us, but it also makes a difference to how other people see their own bodies. If all you're ever seeing is images of people who have been filtered or touched up, or wearing lots of makeup, or have honed their bodies in the gym, or have slimmed down with diets, if you only ever see those kinds of images, then those are going to create that context in which our own bodies feel evermore inadequate by comparison. So what we do individually matters. It's also true that if as individuals we resist, then that has an impact, that can have a political impact on others. But I don't want to say that there's a general duty on individuals to resist because I think that would be extremely onerous for many people but also onerous in a way which is unequal. It would place unequal burdens on people. Our norms about how bodies are supposed to look, our beauty norms in particular, but also our norms that connect how our bodies are and how they relate to identity, are not neutral. They're strongly connected to existing structures of domination and discrimination. Many of our beauty and appearance norms connect, obviously, to norms about gender and sex. But often they're also racialised, they're connected to ideas of age and ageism and ableism. Whether or not you're able to conform to appearance ideals without modification depends to a significant degree on what your body is

like if it was unmodified. And so a general requirement on everybody that we should resist modification would effectively be a position that says, well, some people whose bodies automatically or easily fit in with those dominant standards, they're going to be much more able easily to resist modification than people whose bodies are more out of sync with those dominant standards. I think it's wrong to suggest that individuals have a duty not to modify, that would be a duty that would be unequally imposed on individuals. But it's also, at the same time, significant to say that what we do as individuals does have an effect, does have an impact.

**Julian:** There's a class dimension too, isn't there? I'm thinking that my own mother very much, I think, was a victim a lot of these kinds of norms, and as a working-class woman who worked in shops and hotels, it would have been very difficult for her, more difficult for her, to challenge that than it would be perhaps for an academic like yourself, where there's quite a long tradition of people not conforming to those views. Now, what about health? Health is, again, something people will bring up very, very quickly in these discussions. We modify our bodies a lot for reasons of good health. So, for example, we try to lose weight. Well, some of us do, because we've got too much weight, and that's meant to be healthy and so forth. So I think some people think there's a whole category here which is just unproblematic – if you're doing it for the purposes of health, it's not a problem full stop. Now, I think you think it's more complicated than that. Could you say a little bit about that?

**Clare:** Sure, I could. When I started writing about the unmodified body, I deliberately chose that very unfamiliar phrase 'an unmodified body', because I wanted to highlight that I was sort of picking out something distinctive and to think about what it might mean to be unmodified in this particular way

that I talk about – letting our bodies be good enough. And the way I proceed in the book is to think about that question with three proxy concepts, three more familiar ways of thinking about something like the unmodified body. One of them is an idea of the ‘normal’ body. And that's the idea that strongly relates to ideas of health and functioning. Another way of putting your question about health is, well, surely if we are modifying our bodies so as to make them normal, that's a different kind of consideration. And you see that phrasing about the idea of a normal body and changes to make the body normal coming up a lot in the healthcare setting. So, for example, if you look at the National Health Service website page on cosmetic surgery, it will distinguish on that page between procedures that you want to make yourself look beautiful or different or better, which are cosmetic surgery procedures, which the health service doesn't provide, from reconstructive surgery or plastic surgery, which makes the body look ‘normal’, perhaps after an accident or an illness, and it will provide those. So you see that there's an idea that there's health on the one hand, there's cosmetics on the other, and they're distinct according to the NHS. But in fact the distinction is very difficult, I think, to hold in a very clear way, because a lot of what we think of as health considerations or considerations of normality are just strongly related to cultural standards.

And the example that I use in the book to make this very clear is partly the example of cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery, and which falls into which. The fact that the NHS will provide, for example, reconstructive breast surgery after mastectomy, it calls that a health matter. But it will not provide cosmetic surgery, what it calls cosmetic surgery, to remove what's called an abdominal apron. If you've lost a lot of weight, you might be left with an overhanging flap of skin on your belly. It's called an abdominal apron. And



that overhanging flap of skin can be unsightly, it can be uncomfortable, it can get infected, it can cause irritation and so on. But most NHS Trusts will not provide surgery to remove that abdominal apron because they classify that surgery as cosmetic and not health-related. So why is that the case? Why is it the case that the removal of abdominal apron, which actually can create quite significant health benefits in the case of preventing irritation, infection and so on, that's not counted as a health benefit for the purposes of provision of health care? Whereas reconstructive surgery after mastectomy, which is a purely aesthetic outcome, is described as something that the NHS will provide? And that's an example, I think, where you can see that our decisions about what counts as health and not health are highly cultural. But you might come back to me and say, well, OK, there are perhaps some cases on the margins, but there are surely some changes that we undertake which are purely for health reasons. If somebody is having heart surgery for heart condition, that's only about health and nothing else, or if somebody is, you mentioned losing weight because that's going to be better for their health, that's a different kind of thing. I think that there are some cases where yes, we can say there are some procedures that only make sense under an idea of health. And the heart surgery for a heart condition might be a good example of that. But very often, what we're then thinking about is a kind of public health movement, an idea that we ought to encourage people to modify their bodies to improve their health. We're often straying over into territory which isn't clearly about health.

You gave the example of losing weight as something that might make us healthier. And it may well be the case that many of us would be healthier if we lost weight. But the question is how to achieve that. And normally what we see from a public health perspective is that measures to try to get people

to lose weight for health are about telling individuals to make different choices, they're perhaps about shaming people for not having enough exercise or shaming people for eating too much. They're about telling you to have five portions of fruit a day or three snacks max. or looking at the calorie counts on menus and so on. And they become part of this generalised culture feeling shame about our bodies, and they're often not evidence-based in a sense of whether the public health message actually creates the outcome. There's some very interesting research done by Francesca Solmi at the LSE. She explains how, if you look at these public health campaigns, which aim at reducing BMI at the population level, they tend not to have this effect. There's no evidence they actually work at that level. And what you do see is evidence that some of these campaigns actually have a counter health effect. They might perhaps contribute to disordered eating and to anxiety about the body. And one thing that we do know is that feeling bad about our bodies doesn't tend to translate into more healthy behaviours. Feeling bad about our bodies is actually something that makes us more likely to think about eating for comfort, or binge eating and so on. It just again feeds into the cycle of shame which is so damaging. So I think there are there are places where health blurs into other things. And then there are places where even if what you're concerned with is health, then the methods that we tried to use to modify our bodies for health can be counterproductive.

**Julian:** And also, as you point out, I think 95 per cent of diets don't work. They're unsuccessful. And that's not necessarily because people lack willpower, but all sorts of metabolic things going on there. But I won't go on about that. But here's a really interesting thing in your book. Now, I'll ask people listening to guess what procedure this is describing. It involves unnecessary, risky surgery on women to make their bodies comply with a

profoundly sexist set of norms about women's behaviour, sexuality and value. Now, that sounds very bad, right? Unnecessary, risky, to conform with sexist norms. And what I found interesting about that sentence in your book was that that is used to describe female genital mutilation. But amongst a group of Senegalese women, they would have thought this exact sentence was also a very accurate description of breast implants and so forth. I thought that that was a very bold comparison to make. Do you really think that a lot of cosmetic surgery practices which people voluntarily undertake in western countries are in a way comparable to female genital mutilation?

**Clare:** So that example came from some interviews that a political scientist did with women in both America and Senegal, and she interviewed American women about FGM, female genital mutilation as it's called in law, and she interviewed the Senegalese women about breast implants. And in both cases, what she did is she started by explaining the procedure to the women for whom it wasn't a normal practice in their community, and then she asked them what they thought about it. What was really striking was that both cohorts of women had the same reaction to the practice that was not familiar in their own in their own country and their own context. So that comparison comes from that piece of research, which is, I think, really striking, and one of those quotations from that piece of research from one of the Senegalese women was something along the lines of why on earth would western women come over here to campaign against FGM when they have this appalling practice of breast implants back at home? Why wouldn't they be competing against that at home? And what I think this example shows us is that it's quite easy, I think, to have a critical perspective on a practice when it's not a practice that you yourself are familiar with, when it's not a practice in your own culture. It's quite easy for all of us to look at things that other

people do and say, I would never do that, that's terrible, why would anyone choose to do that? And we might do that in an international way, looking at cultures completely different from our own. But we also might do that within our own culture.

You raised question of class differences earlier, Julian. We might look at practices that people who are in a different socio-economic context to us, or a different gender to us, or a different age to us, and say, I would never do anything like that. It's quite easy to see a kind of criticism of other people's practices. And I think that that cross-cultural criticism is actually the most useful if we do turn it round back upon practices that we ourselves do. And if we question ourselves as to whether there's anything similar in practices that we're much more familiar with, as there is in the practices that we'd like to criticise. So that example of comparing FGM with breast implants does that for me. It makes me think, OK, if we in a in a western, white tradition are used to thinking of FGM as a terrible practice that no one should undertake and no one should do even by choice, what does that tell us about some practices that are much more familiar to us like cosmetic surgery? And of course, FGM is something that's illegal in the UK, even if it's undertaken by an adult woman. So it's illegal to do it on a child, but it's also illegal for an adult woman to choose it for herself. But we do permit labiaplasty, cosmetic surgery on genitals, which can be sort of objectively very similar to FGM, in terms of cutting and removing the same parts of the body. I think that kind of context of asking us to question things we do to ourselves in the way that question others can be very useful.

**Julian:** I thought an interesting comparison there was one reason why Senegalese women found it so appalling was that this interfered with the

function of breasts, what they were for, and to have this sort of weird cosmetic change, to put appearance over function that way, it was for them very unwomanly. I thought that was very interesting. Well, moving on, related to health is the issue of disability. And I think this is a very interesting issue. There are quite a few issues in the book, I think, where you're dealing with areas which are sometimes highly contested, and sometimes hotly contested, and there's a lot of heat, and I think you deal with all of them with great sensitivity, without hedging your bets and sitting on a fence. And disability is a really interesting one. Because I think a lot of people, particularly people who are not disabled, who don't have a disability, kind of think, it's, again, kind of obvious that the modification of bodies to remove disabilities is a good thing. Let's just take that as a starting point. Why is it not straightforwardly a good thing to modify the body to mitigate the effects of disability or to remove a disability?

**Clare:** Thank you very much for saying that I deal with these issues with sensitivity. One of the issues that is difficult for anybody, I think, writing a book like this, where I do try to cover a very broad range of topics, is that of course some of these bodily experiences I have had and some of them I haven't had. And what I've tried to do is listen to lots of diverse voices, read various writers, some of whom are theorists and philosophers and some of whom are not, and not to speak on behalf of anybody but to get a sense of the discourse and to make sense of how we might analyse that from a philosophical point of view. And in the disability context, there is a very strong disability rights movement which really rejects the idea that disability is fundamentally about a problem of bodies. This is what's called the social model of disability and it's a dominant force in disability rights activism. It says that the fact of a body's disability depends not on what the body is like

but it depends on the society and the context that body lives in. So because no human beings can fly, we don't build things in the sky that you'd have to fly to get to. If we did if we build things in the in the sky that you could only access by flying to them, then people who couldn't fly would be disabled. But because none of us can fly, we don't build those things and not being able to fly is not a disability. And they say the same is true of many other features of disability. So if you are somebody who needs to use a wheelchair to get around, then what disables you is if society and the built environment is structured around steps and uneven surfaces and things that you cannot easily navigate with a wheelchair. That what's causing the disability. The fact of your body needing to use a wheelchair to get around or your legs not being able to propel you in a certain way, that's a feature of your body, that's not the disability.

So already you can see that that social model gives a really interesting challenge to the idea that the disabled body is defective. And it suggests that actually disability is about how society treats our bodies and how we how it assumes our bodies will be. The social model has been really helpful for disabled rights theorists and activists. But against that there is this other kind of thought that surely the body does matter to an extent, surely what the body can and can't do is a real thing, it's a fact that some bodies can do some things and some bodies can't do those things, and there's a difference there. And of course that is the case. What our bodies can and can't do, how they enable us and how they constrain us, have real effects on our lives and do make a difference. But it's not always the case that modifying or changing our bodies is a straightforward improvement, even if our bodies can't do something that other bodies can do. The example I use in the book to discuss this is the example of deafness. There's a strong sort of intuition amongst

those of us who are not deaf that to have deafness or hearing loss is to lack something, is to have the absence of a function and the absence of being able to hear must be a serious detriment and something that if it could be cured that would obviously be an improvement. And from the point of view of somebody who is not deaf, that does seem very sensible. But from the point of view of deaf people themselves, that way of thinking about it is often just not right, because deafness, for many deaf people, isn't a mere absence of hearing, it's actually also an identity in itself, and a different way of being in their bodies. And the example here is of sign language. Sign language, which many deaf people use, is not just a kind of translation of spoken language. It's not just that if you wanted to speak sign language, you would need to know how to sign each individual word and just translate one to the other. It's an entirely different method of communication with its own rich syntax and grammar. And it's a very different way of being in the world and a different way of communicating in a way that many deaf people think of as actually being a culture. So they think of it not as simply being a substitute for being able to speak. It's not that at all, it's a different language with its own culture, its own way of being in the world, its own identity attached to it. So I think many for many disabilities, it is the case that they form part of people's identity, as well as simply being part of their body, that they provide access to different kinds of experiences and different ways of being in the world, compared to people without that particular condition. And many people with a disability think of that as something that's an inherent part of who they are, and it's not something they would wish to think of it as a defect that needs to be cured. Now this doesn't mean that we should never try to make disabled people's bodies function better for them. All of us have ways in which our bodies service and ways in which our bodies don't, ways in which our bodies cause us suffering or pain or inconvenience,

and it's of course something that we would all would want to do, to help our bodies work better for us in whichever ways they can. But the simplistic way of thinking about disability as merely a lack or a defect or something that needs a cure or to be eradicated is just that – it's simplistic, and it's something that does harm to disabled people by suggesting that the problem is with their bodies, rather than how their bodies are recognised and respected in the in the environment.

**Julian:** I think at one point, just to sort of paraphrase a bit, I think what you're really saying is that you're not against people modifying their bodies in these cases, you're against the pressure to modify bodies. And that's where the real harm is. And you gave a very good example, I think, in the way you talked about the cochlear implants debate. Now I think a lot of hearing people, when they superficially understand this, they think that, well, surely if you can give children in particular these implants should enable them to hear it would be cruel not to. And I think one of the things you do in the book is you actually very carefully uncover the facts of that and show it's actually not that straightforward. If people think this is just a simple way to give people normal hearing, that's just not the case anyway. And I think that's another thing you sort of do – as you said, the book is very much a philosophical book, but you've really done your homework on the lived experience of people. Do you think that makes you unusual as a philosopher, or do you think more philosophers are doing that than they're given credit for?

**Clare:** Oh, my goodness, what a question. You want me to shop my profession. I think philosophy is very varied. There are some philosophers for whom the idea of thinking about people's experience would be anathema to



the kind of abstract rational thinking they want to do and there are great many philosophers for whom the method has to always start with lived experience. I think it's much more common in feminist philosophy, in social philosophy, in political philosophy, to think that we need to pay attention to people's experiences. But I think if you're going to be a philosopher, as opposed to a sociologist or an anthropologist or a historian or something like that, then people's experiences and people's understanding of those experiences is always only the first step. It's never the final word. I think in philosophy, there is no there is no final word, right? One of the things that characterises the discipline is that we are always trying to start or continue a conversation. We're never in the business of ending it. And we're always open to the fact that our arguments may well be wrong, maybe well be imperfect, we may have missed things. And the process of philosophy is the process of trying to uncover and critique and improve our positions. So I think listening to people's accounts of what it's like to be them, reading the work of people who have experiences is very different from our own, is a fundamentally important part of philosophy, because it tells us where our own assumptions might be wrong and it gives us that insight. But we don't end there. We do the analysis and try and work out what's going on there. One of the things in the book that I'm constantly grappling with is that when we look at this idea of the unmodified body, or the pressures to modify, or the ways that we think about bodies, I see both significant commonalities and significant inconsistencies. So in some parts of the book, I'm trying to draw perhaps surprising connections between body modification practices that we might not think of as being similar. One connection I draw is between the idea of natural bodybuilding and natural childbirth, where I think actually both of those things that seem completely different are actually working with a similar idea of naturalness, strangely,

once we realise that in both cases what it is for that practice to be 'natural' is, I think, strongly connected to gender norms. So I think natural bodybuilding is about a norm of masculinity, natural childbirth is about a norm of femininity. I think you can draw out some really interesting similarities. In many places in the book I'm trying to do that kind of thing. But there are also some significant inconsistencies where we treat bodily practices that are in many ways really similar, very differently. And we've already talked about some of those examples. Why do we treat labiaplasty very differently from FGM? Why do we think that reconstructive surgery is very different from an abdominal apron? So I'm trying to bring out commonalities and also inconsistencies.

**Julian:** OK. I just want to get down to what is maybe the most philosophically tricky part of the book. You say at one point that you're performing a kind of philosophical and political balancing act, and I think that's true of various points. So talking about disability, for example, you think your principle of the unmodified body asserts both that the reality of bodily impairment is something that can cause suffering and constraint, and that your body is good enough just as it is, and there's a kind of balancing act to do that. And I think that's a specific example of a general balancing act you do. When you describe two aspects to the principle – one asserts that the body is a real, material thing with significance and value of its own, but the second says it is at the same time an inexorably political concept, subject to the vagaries of interpretation, manipulated by social norms and structures. So the balancing act here is trying to both affirm, as it were, the givenness of the natural body, to use another contested word, and also the myriad ways in which it is undoubtably subject to interpretation, society and so forth. Could you say a

little bit more about how you managed to do... I think you do manage to balance those two things. How do you do it?

**Clare:** This is a balancing act that I think is inherent, very strongly, in feminist philosophy and feminist theory generally, because feminists have wanted to emphasise both sides of that balancing act. On the one hand, a huge part of the history of feminist thinking has been to reject the idea that women's inequality, women's subordination, is explained and justified by their nature or their physical embodiment. So feminism has been in many ways the history of rejecting the idea that women's bodies are why they are inferior, right? There's a whole chapter in the book where I chart this idea where feminists have had to reject the idea that nature justifies the differences between men and women as seen socially and as seen politically. And a key strategy for feminists to do that has really been to downplay the significance of natural difference, to say that actually women and men are much less different than gendered norms structure them to be. The fact of having different external bodies doesn't translate into fundamentally different characters or different abilities or different statuses and so on. So there's been a lot of feminist theorising which has been about rejecting the idea of the body as a constraint and showing the way that the body is treated is fundamentally political. That's been crucial and continues to be crucial. But at the same time, feminist theory has also been about emphasising the significance of the body as a real thing and as a material thing, because feminists have also wanted to say that the experience of being embodied as a woman is a significant part of women's experiences and their political experience. And so you see things like the idea that the personal is political, which you mentioned, often being about thinking about the ways that our experiences of being in our bodies, our everyday activities, whether it's

things like makeup, or breastfeeding, or menstruation, all these sorts of daily, private personal experiences are actually political because they become politicised and they feed into the ways that women's bodies and women's status generally is made unequal. So feminism wants to do both of these things. They are both, I think, correct. It's not that one is right and one is wrong, but they are clearly intentioned. Because the more you emphasise the significance of embodied experience, the significance of female embodiment, then the less it seems to be plausible to say that there's no significance from embodied experience to social status. And I think that the right way to go here is to say it's about breaking the connection between value judgments and material reality or material difference or material experience. That's really why the principle of the unmodified body is so important, because the principle of the unmodified body says, yes, your body is there, it does things for you and to you, and it has constraints and potentials, and it is a real thing that structures how you live in the world, but that doesn't have to be the same thing as something which is then transported over into a stratified idea of your value in your worth and your position in society. So if we can let our bodies be good enough as they are, we can let the principle of the unmodified body in place, then we are able to say, look, my body is good enough just as it is, it does not have an impact on my social status or my value or my worth, but it is a real thing and it has these particular benefits or disadvantages, constraints that I would like to work within and to address. So that's the balancing act. That's the attempted method of solving it. But as you say, it is it is difficult one, I think it's just an essentially difficult pair of values to maintain.

**Julian:** Yes, it is indeed. By the way, I'm not living in unmodified house so I do apologise if any noises for those modifications leak through. I think the

distinction between sex and gender is, of course, critical here. This is quite a long running one, the established idea in its simple form is that there's a thing called biological sex and there is a thing called gender which is socially constructed. And how those two concepts have been in relation, I think, is something which is dynamic and has changed. And I think you yourself have perhaps moved on this. I'm interested in if you'd say a bit more about that. So in a previous book, *Sex, Culture, and Justice* – and this was published in 2008 – in that book you basically use the term sex and gender interchangeably. So at that point, you thought there wasn't really a value in distinguishing biological sex from social construct. So what's changed between now and then which has made you think you have make clear that they're not the same thing, that there is a difference between biological sex and socially constructed gender?

**Clare:** Thanks. Yes. So I think what I'm always trying to do here is to present ideas and to present arguments in the ways that are the most productive and also the most provocative, whereby provocative I don't mean needlessly getting people annoyed, I mean something like usefully provoking, reflections, thought, analysis in a way that is productive. And at the time that I published that book that you mentioned, *Sex, Culture, and Justice*, there was a real rise in popularity of 'natural', in inverted commas, or 'scientific' explanations for gender inequality. So there was a real rise in arguments, some of them were coming from evolutionary psychology, for example, which said, actually, the reason we have gender norms is because men and women have evolved in different ways and men have evolved to want to have lots of women and women haven't evolved for that and that explains all kinds of things. And there were lots of arguments using evolution to explain everything from beauty norms to behaviour in the workplace, to prevalence

of rape and pornography and so on. There was also a surge in sort of neuroscience and how that kind of accounts for gender difference. Remember that book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, all these popular science, popular psychology and more academic versions, all of which were sort of peddling a strong idea that actually we can go back to the idea that science, bodies, nature, sex, explains society, or social differences. And so in that context, I think it was most provocative in the productive sense, to really highlight the ways in which what we called sex is actually socially mediated – the ways in which we categorise bodies, how we look for evidence from bodies, the sorts of things we research and think about as to possibly being explained by science – how that is all affected by our social context, how science is not immune from that social context, it operates within it. And so in that political context, I think it was most useful to say sex and gender are both cultural, they're both social, they're both impacted by the context that we are writing within so let's think about them as being one. I think in the current context, that's no longer the case. Of course, there are still some of these arguments going on, we do still see that in some popular explanations of gender difference and so on. It's not that that has gone. But I think we're also living in a time where the idea that sex and gender might need to be distinguished is coming strongly under threat and under attack. And it's becoming particularly difficult, I think, for feminists or women generally to argue that there might be again that significance to female embodiment, that that might shape women's experiences of how their lives go and of how they are assessed socially. And so I think I want to kind of come back to that balancing act. We have to recognise on the one hand the strongly social nature of gender, the way that gender and gender inequality and gender identity is fundamentally a social phenomenon that is in our power, socially, to render oppressive or egalitarian, and we need to be

constantly thinking about how gender norms are oppressive to some or can be made more progressive and better. But we also need to recognise that there is a reality to bodies and what bodies do and how they shape our lives and that that's something that is also part of a political analysis.

**Julian:** One of the things that interested me about that is that I think people have, historically, the view of philosophy that it's the kind of disinterested pursuit of timeless truths, if you like. And in saying how your thinking has changed, you've kind of said that, in a way, the difference was that at different times, different things were politically necessary. So in a sense, your philosophical message was sort of calibrated to what you thought was most needed at the time, rather than focused on just trying to establish what the timeless truth was. And I think similar things have been said about truth. There was a time when a lot of philosophers were very keen to attack the idea of truth because it was politically important to take down these ideas of truth with a capital 'T', which were really, in practice, ways of keeping up the status quo and the powerful. And that now, at the moment, it's the opposite, and the attack on truth is very much around reactionary forces. So I was just interested about what you have to say about that, about the job of the philosopher, the philosopher's role, about whether it is the case that, you know, is it just a myth that your interest is... it's disinterest in pursuit of timeless truths. Do you have to be political in what you say? Is there avoiding it?

**Clare:** Well, I think as a as a political philosopher, it's always going to be political. So I think the idea of timeless truth in politics, in human interaction and in power relations, it's not going to be the focus, it's always going to be about assessing, analysing and developing arguments based on political

realities and political goals. That's what the discipline is, as I pursue it. And I think that the idea of the kind of shift in strategy and a shift in tactics, it's not just about changing one's mind. It's also about adapting to a particular context. So I was moved to remember that when I was a very junior lecturer, I moved from teaching... I had been teaching in Oxford, where I did my PhD, to teaching in the LSE, where I was a temporary lecturer at the beginning of my career. And one of the key topics on the syllabus in both places was equality, just straightforward material equality, socio-economic distributive equality. And the way I would teach it in Oxford, that got the students the most interested in discussion and most productive that way, was to present all the problems with equality as an ideal. How can you make people equal? Shouldn't let people deserve different amounts? And so on. And that will get the students really talking and thinking and writing. When I moved to the LSE and started teaching in the same way, the students at that time, it turned out, all thought distributive equality was thoroughly disreputable. And so if I presented the arguments against equality, they all just said, 'yes, obviously, it's no good,' and there was no discussion going on. So I had to completely shift my teaching to presenting the reasons for deliberative equality and the reasons against the particular way that that group of students were thinking. Now that's not to say anything other than in those different contexts with different audiences at different times, a different presentation of the argument can actually get you to the same place. Both sets of students would have come out of that teaching with an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of ideals of distributive equality, and hopefully each with their own much more nuanced understanding and their own perspective on how to defend what seemed to them the most plausible principles. So you're aiming for the same thing. And that's how I see philosophy and political philosophy. It has to be receptive to its context, because what you're trying



to do, if you're doing anything worth doing, I think, is to produce work which in some places speaks to people.

When people read the book, when people read *Intact*, I hope that some parts of *Intact* will speak to the reader, that the reader will think, yes, that's exactly right, that's exactly how it feels, that's what I've always thought, perhaps without knowing it, everything about that section is completely correct and it speaks to me. But I'm hoping that in other parts of the book, the reader will be very confronted, will think, well, I've never thought of it like that, or that doesn't seem right, or surely not, or I'm absolutely appalled by that idea. Of course, what I hope is that for different readers, different parts of the book will trigger those different reactions. And I think it's that productive combination of parts of an argument that feel just right and parts of an argument that feel very strange and unfamiliar that I think is the best thing about philosophy. And if you get both of those things happening in a piece of philosophical work, then hopefully you'll move to think OK, so maybe if I like this bit, there's something in that other bit of the argument that I wasn't moved by. And that's what I'm hoping the reader will do.

**Julian:** I think that's true. I think that if you pick up this book and you're asking yourself, OK, all these controversial topics, where does Chambers stand on this? And they want to put you in a little pigeonhole, but I think that time and again, you find that actually you've thought about it more carefully and have a more nuanced position than virtually anyone else who's shouting about it on social media, for sure. Very briefly, because I've overrun a bit because there's so much to talk about, but I felt we should get the opportunity to... you've got a non-gratuitous and genuinely useful neologism in the book – 'shametenance'. Very, very, very briefly, just so the viewers

have got a new word to take away with them, what is shametenance in a nutshell?

**Clare:** Thank you. Yes, so 'shametenance' is the combination of shame and maintenance. So shametenance is all the things that we do to keep either our bodies or bodily procedures or practices or processes shameful. And we see this, I think, in a wide variety of contexts. Sometimes shamefulness is just about keeping something that we do very private, as a sort of taboo. And the obvious example here would be something like periods, and period shame. The fact that in virtually every context around the world, women are supposed to conceal the fact that they're menstruating, it's not supposed to be something that anybody knows about. So it's that idea that all the things that we do to keep our periods secret is part of shametenance. Sometimes it's things that we do actively to conceal or to sort of disguise our bodies. And one of the examples I use here in the book is the example of 'natural makeup'. Makeup can be very overt, very flamboyant, it's obvious you're wearing it, it's bright red lips, it's big eyelashes – or it can be very subtle. It can be makeup that you can't really tell the person is wearing, and that's what natural makeup is, is makeup that doesn't look like it's there. And natural makeup is in many ways a very appealing form of makeup to wear, because it gets rid of your dark circles, it gets rid of your blotches, it gets rid of your imperfections. But again, it's a part of shametenance because it's concealing, disguising the fact of what your face looks like without it. It's suggesting that there's something wrong with the dark circles, the blotches, the patches and so on. So we do shametenance in all kinds of contexts, and not just things that are to do with women's bodies. I mean, you mentioned the statistic at the beginning, Julian, that I have in the book about... I think it's something like two thirds of men are ashamed of their bodies. So men

engage in shamenance too, ways in which men might conceal body parts that they don't feel are attractive, or they don't feel are manly. So there's a strong connection between masculine shame and a manly appearance, which is usually to do with muscle and a certain powerful appearance. So shamenance – it's the ways we maintain shame around our bodies.

**Julian:** Interesting. And the natural makeup thing, you describe this natural makeup routine requiring a nine-step process and products costing between £200 and £300. So, yes, natural in a very façade sense. Shamenance for me, I think, just involves not removing my shirt in a public place. But I do think there is an aesthetic argument for that, I have to say. Listen, we could have talked about so much more, I've got a long list of unanswered topics I wanted to cover, but I've already gone on a bit more than I should have done a bit naughtily. In the book, you say any defence of the unmodified body is necessarily nuanced, never straightforward, inescapably subtle. And I don't think you were intending in that sentence to describe the virtues of your book, but I think it does, in lots of ways. It is a very nuanced book, a very subtle book, a very thoughtful book. And I think anyone who's remotely interested in these topics will get a lot out of it. And anyone who doesn't think they're interested in the topics, I think will soon become interested by reading about how much is there, just how important this debate really is. It touches on so many parts of our lives, often without us even noticing it. So thank you for the book. And thank you for the conversation, Clare.

**Clare:** It's been lovely. Thanks very much.

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.*

