



Clare Chambers, *Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body*

Allen Lane, London, 2022, Hardcover £20, ISBN 978-0-241-43904-3

Joseph T. F. Roberts¹ 

Accepted: 2 March 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Intact is a call to arms, a manifesto for the need to resist pressures to modify our bodies. Drawing on examples as diverse as bodybuilding, hair styling, make-up, foot-binding, chest-binding, gender affirmation surgery, tattooing, and dieting; Chambers traces how, underlying these practices, is an insidious belief that our bodies are never good enough (p. 1), and that we need to work on ourselves to re-discover our “authentic” bodies (p. 4). In times when “distress about our bodies has reached epidemic levels” (p. 2), and “body modifications once though extreme are now mainstream” (p. 2), this is a prescient and timely intervention in the debate.

Chambers’ *Intact* is an engaging read. Aimed at the general reader, the writing is accessible and clear. Chambers masterfully blends philosophical insights, droll humour, pop-culture references, and journalistic and autobiographical asides together into a seamless whole. The result is a fast-paced book, written with flair, which covers a lot of ground.

Over the course of the book Chambers traces how social pressures to modify our bodies are intertwined with other forms of social oppression such as ableism, sexism, and racism; arguing that oppressed groups are subject to greater pressures to modify to conform than privileged groups.

To counter this pressure to modify, Chambers seeks to revalue the *unmodified body* by arguing that, regardless of what the cultural zeitgeist says, our bodies are good enough as they are. Chambers gives two main arguments for this view. The first argument draws on the idea of public health. Chambers holds that the pressure to modify our bodies is bad for our health, both mental and physical. The second argument holds that the idea that bodies *need* to be changed is, in and of itself, a denial of their moral equality (p. 9). Respecting equal moral worth, on this view, requires ensuring people have equal access to the possibility of an unmodified body. Together, these arguments lead us to the principle of the unmodified body: “your worth should not depend on what your body is like. Who you are, in the sense of your status and political entitlements should not depend on your body fitting some

✉ Joseph T. F. Roberts
j.t.f.roberts@bham.ac.uk

¹ University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ideal” (p. 20). This principle, Chambers argues, is “a premise not a conclusion” (p. 21), a “foundational claim of value, a baseline to be protected” (p. 258).

The book is divided into three main parts, each of which discusses a proxy notion for the unmodified body: the *natural* body, the *normal* body, and the *whole* body. In Part 1, Chambers introduces the notion of the natural body. Chambers does not provide a detailed discussion of the meaning of the term natural body, focusing instead on charting how the notion of naturalness is constructed and contested in different practices. Chapter 1 focuses on how the idea of nature is constructed in competitive body-building, arguing that ‘natural’ body-building isn’t simply about the avoidance of steroid use. What makes ‘natural’ body-building natural is that it aims at mimicking or enhancing natural masculinity (p. 52). What natural body-building proves is that nature, far from being a value-free concept, “always exists in reference to a norm - an ideal, an identity, a set of social standards” (p. 66).

In Chapter 2 Chambers coins the term “shametenance” to describe the modifications people engage in to hide aspects of their bodies considered shameful (p. 70). The examples Chambers focuses on are menstruation, hair styling, and make-up; arguing that “valuing the unmodified body is about refusing to perform shametenance. It’s about refusing to accept that our bodies are never quite good enough. It is about refusing to characterise our bodies in their natural state as gross or disgusting” (p. 75).

In Chapter 3, the discussion shifts away from a direct focus on body modification practices; taking up the wider issue of the role the concept of nature has played in both the subjection of women and feminist philosophy from Wollstonecraft to Judith Butler. In the latter half of the chapter, Chambers takes up the question of whether gender is self-identification; arguing that self-identification cannot be a complete account of gender as there are some circumstances (the example Chambers gives is ‘women only spaces’) in which other criteria of gender may be relevant criteria for admission, such as “usually living as a woman” (p. 129).

Having tracked the ways in which the concept of nature has been used to exclude women, Chapter 4 aims to show that, despite its checkered past, the concept of nature has value for feminism as “it encourages feminists to insist on the value and significance of female-embodied experience in a world where male embodiment is assumed as the default” (p. 132). Drawing on eco-feminist literature Chambers argues that reclaiming the concept of nature allows us to resist the pressure to modify and, in the process, revalue the unmodified body (p. 135).

In Chapter 5, the first chapter in Part 2, Chambers turns her attention to the notion of the normal body, arguing that not all modification to achieve normality (even normal levels of health) is beneficial, as it can result in harms and threats to moral equality. Drawing on examples such as circumcision, the removal of supernumerary digits, and cosmetic surgery, Chambers shows how normality (in both appearance and health) is a culturally constructed, value-laden, category and, therefore, that “we can’t make a sharp distinction between modifications for health and modifications for appearance or identity”, meaning “there’s no reason to think that the political principle of the unmodified body must stop at the boundaries of health” (p. 189).

In Chapter 6, Chambers extends this argument to disability, aligning herself with critical realist models of disability which hold that both bodily characteristics

and social structures jointly create disability (p. 208). Chambers argues “we must take collective action against the pressures to modify, and against a social and medical context the assumes that all disability is bad” (p. 193). To make this case, Chambers engages in an extended discussion of the dilemmas facing parents of deaf children. Should one raise them to sign or should one attempt to raise them to use spoken language? Should the child be given a cochlear implant? Chambers argues that these choices are not simply ‘health’ choices; whichever option one takes will have profound effects on the child’s identity. This, however, is not to say that treatment is never the best option. Although the principle of the unmodified body aims to counter the idea that all disability is bad, it does not advocate non-treatment for impairments that lead to genuine suffering. The goal is to recognise “the multiple ways in which people with impairments have been treated as inferior and, in this context, the principle of the unmodified body is an assertion of equal status” (p. 215).

Chapter 7 focuses on the notion of objectification. Chambers argues that practices like reconstructive surgery, make-up, and the surgical correction of birth defects force us to adopt an external perspective on their bodies according to which “we see ourselves as others see us, and we treat their perspective as the one that counts” (p. 234). To counter this pressure to normalise, Chambers argues the principle of the unmodified body requires we adopt an ‘internal’ notion of normality. On this view, a normal body is “one like mine” (p. 238), one that feels like me. The principle of the unmodified body counsels us to allow our body’s “familiarity to be a virtue” and allow its changes to be acceptable (p. 241) as a means of reducing alienation from our embodied self.

Part III focuses on the notion of the whole body. Chapter 8 examines the reasons people modify their bodies, paying particular attention to gender affirmation surgery. Chambers draws parallels between gender dysphoria and other forms of body dysphoria such as that experienced by burn victims or people with anorexia. The discourses surrounding all of these forms of dysphoria, Chambers argues, share two features: (i) they locate the source of distress in the body, and (ii) they assume that the best form of treatment is body modification (p. 273). Contrary to this discourse, Chambers wants to retain the possibility that body modification may not be the answer, aiming to “reduce the pressures for trans people to modify their bodies” in line with the “general imperative to reduce all pressures to modify” (p. 284).

Having spent most of the book focusing on body modifications people perform on their own body of the book, in the final chapter of the book Chambers takes up the question of when it is permissible to modify the bodies of others. The chapter begins with a striking collection of cases concerning surgical and medical treatment performed on young children. Drawing on the notions of bodily integrity, hypothetical consent, best interests, and the right to an open future, Chambers argues for keeping the body intact whenever possible, delaying the choice until the child can make it themselves (p. 311).

Despite the virtues of this book, and fully acknowledging that it is aimed at a general audience, some readers will be left with concerns and unresolved questions about Chambers’ argument. The first doubt the reader will have about the argument concerns the strength of the prescriptions.

Throughout the book Chambers is at pains to make clear that for some people, some form of modification will be necessary. The unmodified body, although in need of re-valuation, should not be fetishised (p. 133). Modifying one's body to reduce impairment, illness, or disease can all be worthwhile goals. In Chamber's words, "sometimes, conforming to an external standard of normality is easier to deal with, a better course of action - even if that means undergoing body modification" (p. 241). Chambers is also aware that many people see body modification as a form of creativity or an expression of individuality, one that is not clearly forced on them by oppressive social pressures (p. 260).

In light of this, Chambers doesn't want to counsel against these forms of body modification, and is careful not to be overly prescriptive: "Assuming we are adults of sound mind and with full information (not easy to achieve)" she writes, "we should be at liberty to modify our bodies as we see fit" (p. 251). Modification, therefore, can be compatible with the principle of the unmodified body. What the principle of the unmodified body requires us to do is reflect on "the reasons for modification, and to ask ourselves whether they are justified" (p. 251). If there is doubt, we should rule in favour of non-modification (p. 319). Despite the book being framed as a call to arms, the actions we are required to take feel rather minimal, especially if we make the reasonable assumption that many people already ask themselves whether their actions are justified.

A second concern with the argument in *Intact* is Chambers' reliance on notions which are difficult to define precisely, a problem which resurfaces in different guises throughout the book. In the introduction, Chambers attempts to define body modification. Noticing that anything one does will have effects on one's body (e.g. reading this review instead of going for a run will subtly affect how muscular the readers legs will be), Chambers is forced to consider how to delineate the concept to ensure it is not overly expansive. Chambers opts for introducing an intentionality clause: body modification practices are practices through which people intentionally aim to create a certain body shape and/or size (p. 9). The problem is, this criteria doesn't help us decide complex cases as people may engage in practices for a number of reasons, making it unclear what their intention is. However, having noticed this, Chambers simply suggests that we can't unambiguously define body modification and leaves it at that. This leaves the reader wondering whether, having acknowledged the vagueness of the term, we ought to using the term 'body modification' at all. Are there no better, less vague, terms available?

A similar problem emerges with the use of the proxy notions of the *natural* body, the *normal* body, and the *whole* body. Chambers is aware that what constitutes a natural, or normal, or whole body is difficult to define and widely contested. Given these difficulties in defining the terms one wonders why one would choose these notions as proxies at all. Normally the reason for using proxy notions is that the proxy notions are less contested or are easier to define than that for which they are a proxy for. Given that Chambers acknowledges the notions of normal, natural, and whole are not particularly clear, it is not obvious why they are introduced as proxies for the notion of the unmodified body.

A third problem with Chambers' argument is that it focuses almost exclusively on mainstream body modifications such as dieting and cosmetic surgery that tend

to homogenise bodies; altering them to ensure they conform more stringently to dominant heteronormative, ableist and racist beauty norms. In these cases, Chambers' contention that the pressure to modify can be interpreted as a denial of that person's moral equality is reasonable. This argument, however, seems to have less of a purchase on less mainstream forms of body modification such as scarification, tongue-splitting, or the insertion of silicone horns under the skin. If, say, one were to modify oneself to look more like a lizard (as Erik Sprangue A.K.A. 'The Lizard Man' has done) it is hard to see how this sends out any messages about other people's moral equality.

This brings us to a fourth problem. Chambers argues that, when faced with social pressures to conform and modify our bodies, "refusing to modify our bodies can be an act of rebellion, an assertion of autonomy" (p. 5). Granted, but it is not the only possible form of resistance to dominant social pressures, or even the most effective. Making oneself look like a lizard seems to be a more direct challenge to social pressures to modify in socially acceptable ways. It is an unambiguous rejection of dominant pressures to alter the body. It says at a glance "I don't care about your beauty norms". An unmodified body, on the other hand, expresses a less clear signal. Maybe the person hasn't modified their bodies because they haven't got round to it, or because they haven't got the resources. An unmodified body, per se, does not tell us whether the social norms are being rejected or simply not being satisfied.

Despite these problems with some of the particulars of Chambers' argument, many readers will find something valuable in *Intact*. First, the book discusses a broad range of body modification practices and even if one doesn't accept the overarching argument, the reader will undoubtedly learn a thing or two along the way. This was surely the case for me. Second, perhaps I have been overly optimistic in my belief that most people already reflect on their choices to modify their bodies (and hence don't need to be advised to do so). If I'm wrong and people do need reminding, *Intact* will be a valuable resource in helping them reflect on why, how and when to modify their bodies. Regardless of what their choice ends up being, there is value in helping people consider and justify their choices.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.