

I am Clare Chambers, philosopher working on contemporary political philosophy and author of ‘Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State’. AMA!

ClareChambers¹ and r/Science AMAs¹

¹Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

Abstract

I will return at 12PM EDT to answer questions live. Please feel free to leave questions ahead of time! I am Clare Chambers, University Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. I am a political philosopher specialising in contemporary feminist and liberal theory. I’ve been researching and teaching at Cambridge for twelve years. I was educated in the analytical tradition of political theory at the University of Oxford, where I did Politics, Philosophy, and Economics as an undergraduate. After a year spent as a civil servant I studied for an MSc in Political Theory at the London School of Economics. At the LSE I continued working on analytical approaches to political theory in contemporary liberalism, but I also engaged in a sustained way with feminist thought, and with the work of Michel Foucault. It seemed obvious that Foucault’s analysis of power and social construction was of profound relevance to liberal theory, but I had never read work that engaged both traditions. Wanting to work on this combination for my doctorate, I returned to Oxford to be supervised by Prof Lois McNay, who specialises in feminist and post-structural theory, together with Prof David Miller, who specialises in contemporary analytical thought. The result was a thesis that later became my first book: *Sex, Culture, and Justice: The Limits of Choice* (2008). *Sex, Culture, and Justice* argues that the fact of social construction undermines the liberal focus on choice. Liberals treat choice as what I call a “normative transformer”: something that changes a situation from unjust to just. If someone is disadvantaged liberals are likely to criticise that disadvantage as an unjust inequality, but will change that assessment if the disadvantage results from the individual’s choice. For example, women may choose to take low-paid jobs, or to prioritise family over career, or to follow religions that treat them unequally, or to engage in practices associated with gender inequality. However, our choices are affected by social construction. Our social context affects the options that are available to us. It affects whether those options are generally thought to appropriate for people like us. And it affects what we want to do. I argue that, if our choices are socially constructed in these ways, it doesn’t make sense to use them as the measure for whether our situation or our society is just. Instead we need to develop the normative resources for critically analysing choice. Most feminists understand this, and liberals should, too. Feminism is a movement that seeks to empower women, which in part means giving women choice, but it is also a movement that recognises the profound limitations on individual choice, and the way that power, inequality, and social norms shape our choices. My most recent book also combines feminist and liberal analysis and tackles a specific question of state regulation. *Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State* argues that the state should not recognise marriage. Even if state-recognised marriage is reformed to include same-sex marriage, as has happened in many states recently, it still violates freedom and equality. Traditionally, marriage entrenches sexism and heterosexism, and this traditional symbolic meaning has not been destroyed. And all state recognition of marriage treats married and unmarried people and their children unequally, elevating one way of life or relationship form above others. The fact that state recognition of marriage involves endorsing a particular way of life also means that it undermines liberty, especially as political liberals understand that idea. Instead of recognising marriage, the state should regulate relationship practices. Other areas that I work on include multiculturalism and religion, political liberalism and the work of John Rawls, beauty and cosmetic surgery, the concept of equality of opportunity, and varieties of feminism including liberal feminism and radical feminism. I am about to start a new project on the political philosophy of the unmodified body. Thank you for joining

me here! (My proof has been verified by the moderators of /r/philosophy.) Some of My Work: “Marriage as a Violation of Equality” - the first chapter of *Against Marriage* (OUP 2017). You can purchase this book with a 30% discount by going to the OUP site and using promocode AAFLYG6 at checkout Podcast interview on “The State and Marriage” “The Marriage Free State” - podcast recording and paper draft “Sex, Culture and Justice” - interview at 3:AM Magazine Multiculturalism Bites podcast interview on when intervention in peoples’ lives is justified Thank you very much everyone! I really enjoyed your questions. I’m logging off now as the sun starts to set here in the UK. If you’d like to read more about me and follow my work you can find lots more on my website at www.clarechambers.com, which is regularly updated. Goodbye!

[REDDIT](#)

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CLARECHAMBERS [R/SCIENCE](#)

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Sex, Culture, and Justice argues that the fact of social construction undermines the liberal focus on choice. Liberals treat choice as what I call a "normative transformer": something that changes a situation from unjust to just. If someone is disadvantaged liberals are likely to criticise that disadvantage as an unjust inequality, but will change that assessment if the disadvantage results from the individual's choice. For example, women may choose to take low-paid jobs, or to prioritise family over career, or to follow religions that treat them unequally, or to engage in practices associated with gender inequality. However, our choices are affected by social construction. Our social context affects the options that are available to us. It affects whether those options are generally thought to appropriate for people like us. And it affects what we want to do. I argue that, if our choices are socially constructed in these ways, it doesn't make sense to use them as the measure for whether our situation or our society is just. Instead we need to develop the normative resources for critically analysing choice. Most feminists understand this, and liberals should, too. Feminism is a movement that seeks to empower women, which in part means giving women choice, but it is also a movement that recognises the profound limitations on individual choice, and the way that power, inequality, and social norms shape our choices.

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Other areas that I work on include multiculturalism and religion, political liberalism and the work of John Rawls, beauty and cosmetic surgery, the concept of equality of opportunity, and varieties of feminism including liberal feminism and radical feminism. I am about to start a new project on the political philosophy of the unmodified body. Thank you for joining me here!

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Some of My Work:

["Marriage as a Violation of Equality"](#) - the first chapter of *Against Marriage* (OUP 2017). **You can purchase this book with a 30% discount** by going to the [OUP site](#) and using promocode **AFLYG6** at checkout

[Podcast interview on "The State and Marriage"](#)

"The Marriage Free State" - [podcast recording](#) and [paper draft](#)

["Sex, Culture and Justice"](#) - interview at 3:AM Magazine

[Multiculturalism Bites podcast interview on when intervention in peoples' lives is justified](#)

Thank you very much everyone! I really enjoyed your questions. I'm logging off now as the sun starts to set here in the UK. If you'd like to read more about me and follow my work you can find lots more on my website at www.clarechambers.com, which is regularly updated. Goodbye!

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am Clare Chambers,
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A critique of liberal/leftist feminism is that its based entirely around the benefit of women with privilege, often in ways they can't really comprehend. The ability to both chose and lobby for accepting other partnering modalities over legal marriage seems myopic. The focus on choice also projects a political ideology that ignores cultural differences. It neglects the necessity many poor white women feel to marry for security. Poor white Americans may lean more conservative because liberalism/leftism wants to dismantle an important institution of their security

It also ignores minority women esp those of low socioeconomic status. An example might be limited availability of partners to chose from bc of mass incarceration. Again, it's a projection of mainstream leftist/feminist ideas for best practice. It bolsters the illusion of knowing whats best for all Americans, ignoring all other sub-sociocultural paradigms.

When I hear "liberal" and "feminism" in the same breath it always conjures the image of a white middle class woman. This echos heavy criticism from intersectional and minority focused discussion.

What are your thoughts on the above statements and what measures do you take to make sure your work is intersectional?

[xtimewitchx](#)

Thank you for the questions. Some of them are general and some of them are specific. Let me try and answer some of them.

Marriage is generally much more common for white Americans than for black Americans. Katharine Franke has a fantastic book on this issue - it's called *Wedlocked* - and I use it at various points in my book *Against Marriage*. As you say, mass incarceration is part of the reason for the difference in marriage patterns between white and black Americans, as is the legacy of slavery. But I argue that these differences strengthen my critique of marriage. A focus on marriage as the paradigmatic stable family form is racist in that it casts the dominant family form for white Americans as the dominant family form for all, even though it is not in fact the paradigmatic stable family form for all. Similar concerns arise with class. A focus on marriage as the paradigm contributes to the stigma of the single mother, particularly the poor single mother.

As for the choice paradigm: in my work, particularly my book *Sex, Culture, and Justice*, I critique a focus on choice. I absolutely agree, and argue in that book, that a focus on choice obscures culture and social context.

As for intersectionality in general, and the question of perspective, we all have a perspective, and we are all necessarily more familiar with our own perspective than with anyone else's. I am white and middle-class, and so are many philosophers. But my work does engage directly with the assumptions of liberalism, and with the importance of recognising and critiquing those assumptions, with respect to sex, class, race, culture and context in general. I don't claim to be able to escape my own particular subject-position. No-one can. (I also certainly don't claim to know what is good for all British people, let

alone all Americans!) But I do try to question my own culture, my own assumptions, and the assumptions of the philosophical traditions I work within and against.

Dr. Chambers, I have two questions:

If all aspects of our behavior and character are unavoidably constituted in some way by social construction (indeed neurologically speaking a brain won't even develop properly at all without cultural exposure), then isn't liberal individualism undermined altogether?

Also, how is the state recognizing marriage any different from the state "regulating relationship practices" with regards to favoring one conception of the Good life above others?

[KaliYugaz](#)

Two great questions, thank you.

On the first, it depends what you mean by "liberal individualism". I think that social construction does undermine some ways of thinking about individual autonomy, for example the idea that individual choice is enough to make a situation just, but that it doesn't undermine the importance of thinking about, and caring about, individuals as opposed to merely collectives.

On the second question, there is a difference between regulating relationship practices separately, as I advocate, and recognising a specific relationship format or way of life with a bundle of rights and duties. Marriage is a relationship form that bundles together relationship practices such as cohabitation, financial dependence, sexual intimacy, monogamy, parenting, next-of-kinship, caring, permanence / commitment and so on. For many people these relationship practices are bundled together into one dominant relationship; but for many other people, they aren't. You might have children with one person but not or no longer have any other relationship with them. You might have caring responsibilities for elderly relatives and children, while living with a sexual partner. Regulating these practices individually recognises the diversity of real lives and avoids claims about the best family form or way to live, whereas bundling them together in marriage suggests that there is one correct or best way to arrange personal relationships and families.

In the announcement thread [/u/The_Unlucky_Wanderer](#) asked:

Dr. Chambers, You stated in your statement above that, "Instead we need to develop the normative resources for critically analyzing choice," what do you mean by this statement? Also, if we were to construct such "normative resources" who and how would we define these under a very individualist society?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Hello, and thank you for your question. I develop this approach in my book *Sex, Culture, and Justice*. There I argue that choices are normatively problematic if they are characterised by the disadvantage factor and the influence factor. The disadvantage factor applies if people who make a certain choice are made worse off by that choice. The influence factor applies if we can identify ways that people are influenced, or encouraged, to make that choice. If both the influence and disadvantage factor are present then the choice is normatively problematic or unjust. And we have particular reason to worry if the influence is coming from people who do not themselves make the disadvantageous choice.

One example I use in the book is the choice to become a full-time housewife, who devotes her time to domestic and caring work and is financially dependent on a breadwinning spouse. Now, being a housewife has various advantages, such as being able to spend time with children. But it brings with it

a very serious disadvantage of financial dependence, and that dependence can be hard to reverse since it can be difficult to return to a career after extended time away.

That doesn't mean that there is necessarily anything unjust about a woman choosing to become a housewife. A woman may decide that the benefits of time with her children are worth the costs of financial dependence. However, there are also many ways that women are influenced or encouraged to focus on caring work at the expense of their own financial security. The idea that mothers in particular should devote themselves to their children is very strong in many societies, with women made to feel that they are doing something wrong if they prioritise their careers. Men, on the other hand, are made to feel that they are doing something wrong if they prioritise their families. (Joan Williams writes about this norm in her excellent book *Unbending Gender*.) So women are strongly influenced to prioritise caring work over financial independence, which means that the fact that they choose to do so is not enough to make the situation just.

In response, we could try to mitigate either the disadvantage factor, or the influence factor, or both. In this example, mitigating disadvantage would mean providing financial safeguards, pay, or benefits for housewives and full-time carers; providing support for women re-entering the workplace after time away; and ensuring that mothers, carers and women in general are not discriminated against. Workplaces should become more family-friendly and flexible. Mitigating influence would mean that we should encourage both women and men to think that parenting is their responsibility and that they can succeed in the workplace even after having children.

This is a very interesting subject and I agree with you about the limitations of choice. What do you mean by the state should regulate relationship practices, though? I'm more inclined to think that the state shouldn't regulate relationships at all, at least when coercion or violence isn't involved. Wouldn't regulation of relationship practices just lead to even further codification of individuals lives than state sanctioned marriage alone? Thanks in advance

[SoundByMe](#)

Thanks for the question. Not all relationship practices require regulation. For example, I don't think the state needs to regulate specifically the relationship practice of gift-giving, for example by stipulating the conditions under which you are entitled to expect a gift from a friend or how much a birthday gift should cost. Relationship practices need regulation either when they need to be determinate in law, or when there is vulnerability. For example, the law needs a way of determining who owns a house or other property, and it needs a way of determining who has parental responsibility, and it needs a way of determining who is next of kin, and so on, and so relationship practices pertaining to these questions need regulation. As for vulnerability, relationship practices like financial dependence, cohabitation, and caring can bring significant vulnerability, and so it is right that the law should regulate these so as to provide adequate protection for the vulnerable.

In the announcement thread </u/mikeockertz> asked:

Dr. Chambers, what do you make of Andrea Dworkin's statement that "marriage as an institution developed from rape as a practice"?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thanks for the question. Andrea Dworkin is a wonderful philosopher whose work is very rarely given the attention and sustained reading it deserves. It's difficult, complicated, challenging work that needs careful and repeated study, just like other philosophy. So, one statement on its own is not really enough to give a sense of her view. But in that statement Dworkin is engaging with and contributing to

the feminist critique of marriage as an institution that has existed in many societies to give men rights over women, including the right to have sex with them against their will. Now we call this rape, but in England and Wales it is only since 1991 that the law has recognised the crime of rape within marriage. Before that time, men had the legal right to have sex with their wives regardless of their wives' consent. And so it is quite easy to see how marriage as an institution has developed as a way of legitimating the practice of rape.

Dear Dr. Chambers

I wanted to ask you a question about your proposal to have the regulation of marriage be done piecemeal, and how this proposal faces some of the same problems from the perspective of non-legally-recognised marriages (so-called 'common-law marriage', the term I'll use to refer to them from hereon) as it does from legally recognised marriage. I haven't read the book, and sadly my university doesn't give me access to it, but the precis and reviews I've read make me curious about what you would say, because it does mention related issues to this one but still doesn't make it clear how you handle the fact that in a society it is going to be largely agreed upon what bundles of practices constitute common-law marriage. This opens up problems with the piecemeal regulation of marriage: specifically, that while the piecemeal regulation of committed and stable relationships treats it as an open question what bundles of practices are in play, it may very well be that the parties to such a relationship take it as settled that the kind of relationship they're in involve such-and-such bundles. So, there can be a mismatch between the legal reality with the piecemeal regulation and the actual social reality of the relationships it is meant to regulate.

There are a lot of related issues here, so I'm trying to make it clear which one exactly I have in mind: to wit, that even non-formally-recognised long-term stable and committed relationships tend to have specific bundles of relationships, rights, and responsibilities attached to them in a way that piecemeal regulation may fail to capture. Let me give a toy example. Consider a jurisdiction that recognises bundles of practices A, B, C, and D as possible targets of regulation. Now, consider that the societal expectations are such that common-law marriage involves A, B, and C, but not D. A point comes up where it needs to be decided whether bundle C applies to a particular relationship between X and Y. X sees their relationship as involving A and B, but Y sees it as involving A, B, and C, but not D. A large part of the reason for why Y sees things that way is because the bundle {A, B, C} is the socially expected arrangement for common-law marriage in their society. How does piecemeal regulation handle this case?

It is easy to imagine a situation where the standing of bundle C hasn't been of interest in this relationship up until now. Imagine A is something like 'romantic exclusivity', B is 'shared financial responsibility for household expenses' and D is 'community of property' (it doesn't really matter what A, B, and D are since they aren't under dispute, but I'm offering this to flesh out the example). And let's say C is 'shared financial responsibility for the costs of child-rearing, present and future'. In some societies C is taken as an expected part of a stable and committed relationship, and in some societies it isn't. But X and Y find themselves in a situation where it is. Nonetheless, the standing of C hasn't come up yet, let's say because X and Y haven't had children. But at the point where X and Y are expecting a child, it suddenly matters a great deal. But X doesn't want to accept C, because it hasn't been a part of their relationship thus far, but Y wants C to hold, because it is what is socially expected from the kind of relationship X and Y are in, and it isn't unreasonable for Y to have thought this.

Hopefully this example makes my worry clearer. I look forward to your response.

[irontide](#)

Thanks for the question. I'm not sure I've quite grasped the worry, but the idea is that the law regulate

practices, but not bundles.

So, there would be laws that answer questions like:

--Who is a child's parents, and who has parental responsibility?

--Who owns a house / other property?

--If two or more people live together without a tenancy agreement, what (if any) legal rights and duties do each acquire?

I don't suggest what the answers to these questions should be, and you're right that they will differ between societies. But the law should be clear and public. Then, anyone who wishes to engage in the relevant relationship practice (becoming a parent, or living together, or becoming co-owners, etc) without incurring the relevant legal rights and duties would have to formally contract with their partner(s) to opt out. If one wants to opt out and the other doesn't, there is no opt out and the default law applies - which should have been designed with justice in mind. If you want to avoid the law and your partner doesn't, then your only option is not to engage in the relevant relationship practice.

I hope that helps?

Hi Dr Chambers - thanks for joining us today!

I wanted to ask about the relation between your views on marriage and about related positions on monogamy in ethics. Recently some philosophers (e.g. [Hallie Liberto](#)) have argued that monogamy is morally problematic. Do you think there are problems with monogamous marriages on a personal or societal (i.e. non-state) level, or is the problem on your view specifically stemming from the state recognition of a particular institution?

Thanks!

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

Thank you for the question. It's not part of my argument to make an assessment of the value or ethics of monogamy or non-monogamy for individuals. At a societal level, I do engage with the arguments of philosophers like Stephen Macedo and William Galston who argue that monogamy is critically important for the public good and the development of a responsible citizenry. I'm sceptical of those arguments: I don't think the evidence is there to support the claim that monogamy, as opposed to commitment and stability, is socially important, or that state-recognised marriage is the right way of securing social goods.

In the announcement thread [/u/drrocket8775](#) asked:

Hi Dr. Chambers!

For the last couple months I've been spit-balling a paper idea to myself about dating ethics, specifically being open to do date all kinds of people. *Prima facie* romantic relationships are within the purview of justice because they often serve as mechanisms for distribution of resources. If I'm poor, and only other poor people will date me, it seems like I've been treated unjustly. But the implication that, as a matter of justice, people need to be open to dating people who are demographically very different to them sounds a little odd. If our social norms say it's ok for people not to be romantically and/or sexually interested in certain genders, why does that change for other other categories like race or socio-economic levels? Maybe our dating norms have some sort of underlying pathology, or they're just not that consistent, but they seem like matter of justice nonetheless.

Do you have any cursory thoughts about such a topic? It seems like it'd be good enough for me to spend the summer on detailing out for potential publication, but maybe I'm just missing something.

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thanks for the question. It's a very interesting topic. I understand your point that relationships can be mechanisms for the distribution of resources. Still, I don't think that distributive justice is the right paradigm for thinking about our willingness to enter into a dating or romantic relationship. I don't think we have a duty to date anyone, nor do we wrong anyone simply by being unwilling to date them. Intimate relationships must necessarily be not only consensual but enthusiastically so: each of us has the absolute right to refuse to enter into an intimate relationship with anyone, for any reason at all. Our own autonomy and bodily integrity are enough to justify refusing to engage in any intimate act or relationship, with anyone.

That doesn't mean that all reasons are necessarily noble reasons, or reasons that could appropriately be recommended to others as general principles. But we don't need a noble or generally-applicable reason not to date someone: it's enough that we just don't want to. You are right that in general we shouldn't discriminate against people because of their race or socioeconomic status. But this doesn't mean that we have a duty to overcome our own racism or classism by entering into intimate relationships that we don't want. No one has a legitimate complaint against someone who refuses to date them.

You're one of the few philosophers (to my knowledge) who not only works on topics with obvious applications but has also done a bit of that work yourself, with a year as a civil servant. I was hoping that you could speak a bit about that experience and what it was like, and about this line from your 3:AM interview:

A year as a civil servant in the Cabinet Office convinced me that my calling is in the meaningful, concise precision of philosophical thought, something that is really only possible in any sustained way within academia.

As the job market for academic philosophy grows worse and worse many young philosophers are looking at non-academic positions with which they could utilise their skills. Could you talk a bit about how civil service differs from academic philosophy, and about how young philosophers might present themselves as good candidates for such positions?

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

Thanks for the question. The main difference between being a philosopher and being a civil servant is that as a philosopher you write as yourself whereas as a civil servant you write as an administrator or a representative of government. This means that there is a great deal more autonomy in philosophy! I found that the virtues of bureaucratic writing were quite different from those in academia: in the former, vagueness is often very useful and precision can be dangerous.

Still, philosophers can be excellent civil servants since we know the significance of language and argument. The UK civil service uses an array of tests and interviews for admission to its Fast Stream, and these also require skills that philosophers excel in: logical thinking, quick assessment of material, decision-making, precis and so on.

In the announcement thread [/u/DadTheMaskedTerror](#) asked:

Dr., a question regarding the Marriage Free State paper. In it you propose requiring the state to abolish marriage and in place of marriage reinstate an unbundled set of former marriage rights. In such a state

every couple would negotiate each unbundled potential right, weighing their own personal pros & cons for their current and possible future statuses, and presumably hire attorneys to document their choices. Do you see any practical problems in implementing such a regime for the average couple? Even if such decisions & negotiations would be child's play for Cambridge philosophy Ph.,D.s would you be doing any favors for the rest of society by removing a simple and commonly understood default option and replacing it with a more complex and arcane choice set?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thanks for your question. To clarify, I don't argue that couples should negotiate each unbundled potential right. The default directives apply automatically to everyone who is engaged in the relevant relationship practice. So no-one needs to hire attorneys and so on to get legal protection. You would need to hire a lawyer and negotiate a particular position only if you and your partner wanted to deviate from the default legal directives that grant you rights and duties to secure justice in the relevant relationship practices.

You are right that it is important to have legal regulation that can be commonly understood. But it's not true to say that marriage is an example. People generally know what marriage is, true, but they don't generally know what the laws of marriage and divorce are, because these are incredibly complex, vary from state to state, and are often settled by case law. So in a marriage regime you need a lawyer to help you divorce or write a pre-nup, and it can be hard to predict how a court will rule in a dispute - even for a Cambridge Philosophy PhD.

[1] Without state-recognition, would marriage be regulated so as to conform with various [UN conventions?](#)

[2] If Marriage remains a powerful institution, without state-recognition or regulation, will progress be easier to achieve for disadvantaged groups?

[3] Is there evidence that suggests (or reasons to believe/predict that) removing state-recognized marriages would in effect reduce the (negative) impact from, broadly, the Marriage Social Construct?

[4] Is there evidence that relates (y) changes in sex/gender equality to (x) introducing/removing civil marriage or state-recognized marriage?

[5] There are many Middle East countries, Syria, Jordan, Indonesia, etc., with a mere post-hoc registration from states. It has been argued that introducing civil marriages would improve equality/freedom in those countries. Would this undermine your argument?

[Mauss22](#)

Thank you - you're asking about the particular empirical effects of moving to the marriage-free state in different times and places. It's certainly possible that in any given historical or geographical location the marriage-free state could be worse than the realistic alternative. For example, after the US Supreme Court decision that same-sex marriage bans were unconstitutional, some politicians argued that their states should stop recognising marriage at all so as to avoid having to recognise same-sex marriage. Moving to the marriage-free state in those circumstances could well be a bad thing as it would entrench homophobia, and I wouldn't advocate doing so. Mine is a philosophical argument which has to be weighed up against the particular political considerations in any given context.

Why does marriage still survive, with the blessings of even the atheists and those with a 'scientific mindset'?

[fragranceoflife](#)

It's a tradition, a potent cultural form, evoking many desiderata: security, commitment, family, romance, hope, celebration, gifts, dressing up! And in a marriage regime, of course, marriage is an important way of gaining legal protection. Under existing laws of marriage it can often make rational sense for a couple to marry.

In the announcement thread [/u/willbell](#) asked:

What do you think of the prospects of theories that try to recover choice in non-classical forms, such as conceptions of relational autonomy in bioethics?

What authors in particular do you think adhere to the entire conception of choice that you attack? As someone interested in early modern, what I've noticed is a lot of authors criticizing large swathes of philosophy tend to really just run thinkers together (my example is I found Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* to be reading Locke and others like him to be more or less just more Hobbesians, which annoyed me, she also misses out on a lot of the nuances of Locke's conception of self-ownership and Locke's state of nature (in part because she reads Locke like Hobbes)). So I ask this question to see for which authors you think your thesis really hits home.

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thanks for the question. My work is focused on contemporary analytical liberalism, and I discuss in *Sex, Culture, and Justice* the different ways that contemporary liberals rely on the concept of choice. In that book I have extended discussions of Brian Barry and Martha Nussbaum, who are interesting precisely because both philosophers do recognise the significance of culture yet still rely on choice to play a crucial role.

I've also written a lot about political liberalism, particularly as developed by John Rawls, to try to uncover the implications and limitations of that approach. I think that political liberalism has very significant implications, such that political liberals should oppose generally-accepted practices such as state-recognised marriage (because it violates liberal neutrality) and infant circumcision (because it undermines individual choice). But I also think that political liberalism is inadequate to deal properly with many forms of inequality and social norms that people choose to comply with, such as many practices and norms of gender inequality.

In the announcement thread [/u/frogandbanjo](#) asked:

Dr. Chambers,

Are you concerned that the concept of an unmodified body descends into absurdity if we (sensibly, in my opinion) view humanity's tool-inventing and tool-using capabilities as effectively identical to body modification? After all, we wear some of our tools regularly (eyeglasses/contacts,) and while there is certainly a social agreement that this modification is beneficial rather than harmful, one could certainly plant a flag and say that perhaps society should change for my nearsightedness rather than my having to modify myself for it, and that from my perspective the eyeglass-wearing is therefore "harm." All things being equal, I sure would rather not have to worry about it at all!

Certainly that would seem absurd to some people, but what if we talk about smartphones in your pocket that increasingly seem mandatory - and especially if we add an "...if you want to be/do/go x" to that "mandatory?" That "if" is certainly the crux of social construction after all. You don't *have* to abide by most social constructs in a liberal society... so long as you're willing to pay a price.

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Thank you for your question. I am about to start the project on the idea of the unmodified body, so I don't have the answers yet. One thing I want to explore is whether it makes sense to think of there being such a thing as an unmodified body, or a natural body, or an essential body (something that feminists have long criticised). This is a rich philosophical area. I certainly don't anticipate making the argument that all modification is bad.

I wouldn't describe wearing glasses as body modification, any more than wearing clothes is: it doesn't change the body itself. Laser eye surgery is body modification. Body modification can be done to improve function or health, but I'm more interested in body modification that is done for other reasons, such as to improve or change appearance or to fit with cultural norms.

Still, your question is an interesting one. The idea that society should change for your nearsightedness rather than you having to wear glasses is of course not absurd: there are things that can and should be done at the societal level as we do for various disabilities, such as providing literature in braille or large print, or ensuring wheelchair accessibility, and so on. But there will generally be limits to what can be done at a societal level and what has to be done at the individual level.

Dr. Chambers,

I had the impression that state-recognized marriage in the US was a result/recognition of collective property ownership.

Would the termination of marriage contracts also mean the termination of collective property ownership?

[Indon_Dasani](#)

Thank you for the question. I don't argue for the termination of collective property ownership. Even in a marriage regime marriage is not the only way of owning something with someone else: non-marital contracts are also possible. You can buy a house or other property together with your friend, or your parents, or your business partner - or your unmarried life partner. Ending state-recognised marriage wouldn't change that.

These are generally examples of contractual co-ownership. The state always has to have laws in place that determine who owns property, and whether the only way to get a stake in some property is contractual or whether there can be other ways. For example, who owns a house? Is it just the person whose name is on the deeds? Or does someone who contributes financially to the house, perhaps by paying some of the mortgage, thereby get a stake? Do you become entitled to a stake in some property if you contribute to it with unpaid labour, such as caring or domestic work?

In my book I don't give answers to specific policy questions such as these. We will all have different views and settling these questions would take many more books! Instead I argue that each reader should consider what she or he thinks is the most just way of regulating unmarried people who engage in relationship practices such as being financially dependent, or cohabiting, or parenting, or migrating, and then apply these rules to everyone. People who wanted to deviate from those rules could form formal contracts opting out.