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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

*Adriana Zaharijević**

PHILOSOPHY OF MENSTRUATION: THE BODY THAT IS NOT BODILESS

Abstract: *The question this text raises is how do we think about the bodies that bleed, "we" being in particular those whose bodies bleed regularly? The question is philosophical in kind, as it tests our capacities to think about such bodies. Philosophy as a corpus has had little to say about menstruating bodies, which curiously also applies to feminist philosophy. Since these bodies do exist and we need to think of them in some way – not only for the sake of thinking, but also in order to apply legal measures in an equitable way – the text proposes the following: to see how bodies were framed in philosophical thought, departing from the notion of a bodiless body as the central paradigm in conceptualizing the philosophical subject, to make room for greater pluralism, and a fortiori, equality in thinking about human embodiment. The key claim is that it is bleeding that stands firmly in the way of conceptualizing bodies as bodiless.*

Key words: Body, Bleeding, Bodiless Body, Philosophy, Menstruation.

1. Introduction: Do Philosophers Menstruate?

Let me begin in a feminist fashion, with a first-person account. My first theoretical encounter with menstruation took place when I, a first-year student of philosophy, incidentally found a book in my parents' library dealing with blood rituals. By that time, I was a fully menstruating person,

* Principal Research Fellow, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, Belgrade; e-mail: adriana.zaharijevic@ifdt.bg.ac.rs ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4884-7158. I wish to extend my gratitude to Violeta Beširević who invited me to the conference *Menstrual (In)Justice* – an event unique not only in the Serbian context – and who was open to the idea of something called "philosophy of menstruation". This research was financed by the taxpayers of the Republic of Serbia, via the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the Realization and Financing of Scientific Research 451-03-136/2025-03/200025. The paper was written under conditions of systemic repression and overt media, legal, financial and psychological pressures exerted by the current state regime on the entire academic community, students, teachers, and pupils alike. It is dedicated to them, who are fighting bravely for a better social world.

well acquainted with pains, stains, shame, and silence. The book whose title I cannot remember was in the field of anthropology, as it described tribal practices in the far-away lands frozen in time. And yet, the new millennium approaching, it felt strangely familiar, uncannily estranging.

I wager that many menstruating persons often imagine themselves as sometimes – irksomely, tiresomely, cyclically – bleeding, while at most other times they are something else; whatever they are or want to be, it is not bleeding that defines them. For example, I saw myself as a student of philosophy, a reader of Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Descartes. Yet, I can bet that many a time, while I was reading any of these thought-fellows, I was simultaneously producing blood, inadvertently, unwillingly, which somehow stained our fellowship. Can a philosopher menstruate? Or better still, am I one thing when I think, read and write, and something quite other when I bleed – something much closer to the indigenous women banished to their socially detached huts till their bleeding stops? Can we be philosophers – or doctors, engineers, priestesses, judges, scientists – while we at the same time bleed?

The question this text raises is how do we think about the bodies that bleed. Anthropology was for a long time the only sphere of knowledge that dared to speak about things impure and dangerous, possibly because it transferred them to realms distant and distinct from our own. Thus, for example, Mary Douglas tells us that in various peoples, such as the Māori, the Nyakyusa, and the Lele of the Kongo, menstrual blood signifies something *more*, through which a bleeding person is defined. This blood is, paradoxically, "the sort of human being manqué," a sign of a person that never was.[1] A living person, its temporary carrier who every now and then "has" in itself a dead person that never lived, emanates danger. The danger lies in small everyday actions that are potentially detrimental. For example, a "menstruating woman could not cook for her husband or poke the fire, lest he fall ill. She could prepare the food, but when it came to approaching the fire she had to call a friend in to help. These dangers were only risked by men, not by other women or children. Finally, a menstruating woman was a danger to the whole community if she entered the forest. Not only was her menstruation certain to wreck any enterprise in the forest that she might undertake, but it was thought to produce unfavourable conditions for men."[2]

We should not be too quick in concluding that these magical ascriptions resided solely in the indigenous, tribal minds, of interest only to the

1 Douglas, M., (1966) 2001, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London and New York, Routledge, p. 97.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

inquisitive anthropologists.[3] The dangers of the women's blood, realized or unrealized in a newborn person, were well known in the very cradle of the Western world. Anne McClintock argued that the ritual of baptism – in so many ways related to cleansing and removing stains of blood, of the earthly birth – "with its bowls of holy water, its washing, its male midwives – is a surrogate birthing ritual,"[4] re-enacting childbirth, but in a proper way. Women are "incomplete birthers", unfit to "inaugurate the human soul into the body of Christ".[5]

It is the blood that adds something to women. This addition is of a curious kind, since it functions rather as subtraction, a discount in humanity. Blood is the sign of lack, of the spectral, the earth, matter, filth, danger. This is why we do not like to see it. If it is only a sign and not an image, we can pretend not to know about it; we can unknow it by unseeing it. At the Menstrual (In)Justice conference, I used the PowerPoint presentation with few words and many artistic figurations of menstrual blood. My intention was to make us see, to make the signs overt. After the presentation, I was approached by two scholars who, with some discomfort, commented on how graphic the presentation was. Both of them were women and both presented on the topic, if from a different perspective. So, we can speak about "it", as we often do in venues not academic in kind, but we cannot allow "it" to be seen.

We know this phenomenon from the history of art. Venuses of all kinds, the epitomes of perfect female embodiment, often exude something entirely inhuman, where the body is "all surface, from which nothing leaks or exits".[6] One is not to play with this image. The artist Rupi Kaur posted an image of herself lying with her back to the viewers in a pose evoking the *Rokeby Venus* (though clearly outside of a boudoir and without Cupid and mirrors), with a patch of menstrual blood on the sheet and another one on the sleeping figure's pajama.[7] What this image depicts is known

3 Simone de Beauvoir quotes Pliny's *Natural History* saying that "the menstruating woman spoils harvests, devastates gardens, kills seeds, makes fruit fall, kills bees; if she touches the wine, it turns to vinegar; milk sours", qtd. in Beauvoir, S. de, 1956, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Parshley, H. M., London, Johnatan Cape, p. 168. For very contemporary biases along the same lines, see Marina Sakač Hadžić's paper Missing Menstruators: How Activist Work Highlights the Knowledge Gap, in this special section.

4 McClintock, A., 1995, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York and London, Routledge, p. 29.

5 *Ibid.*

6 McCormack, C., 2021, *Women in the Picture. Women, Art and the Power of Looking*, London, Icon Books, p. 58.

7 The name of the image is "period". The image, originally part of an educational project, is one in a series of menstruation-themed photographs, which unexpectedly gar-

to too many of us, yet it was censored twice and removed by Instagram for violating community standards for material. Contemporary Venuses in scanty lingerie hurt no communities and no standards, yet those that bleed do. The old magical notions of filth and danger are still with us, hampering how we see things and speak of them.

Seeing and speaking about things is always related to how we think of them. Are menstruating bodies excluded from the process of thinking? Do they fit in the frame of the human body, the frame we take into account when we think of humans, some of whom also menstruate? These seem to be philosophical questions that require a certain philosophy of menstruation. But, can there be such a thing as a philosophy of menstruation, and why does even this coinage sound preposterous and bizarre? This text aims to touch upon these questions, remaining focused on the crucial one: how is one to think the body that bleeds cyclically?

2. Philosophy and Bodies

One might argue that nothing mentioned in the introduction is of any relevance to philosophy. We are, in fact, moving within the realms of sociological imagination, where personal troubles – such as involuntary leaking[8] – are turned into social issues and problems open to reason.[9] Philosophy tackles the universal or, at the very least, universalizable phenomena: it is not interested in my body if my body cannot be elevated to "the" body or body "as such". The body is a generally suspect subject of philosophical reflection. Its position in the hierarchy of being, from Plato onwards, has always been quite low, especially if its functions are taken into account. In this merciless hierarchy, the bodies of women are yet another level down, since they belong to the paradigmatically particular cohort of bodies – sexed, wombed, marked by the unutterable, unseeable processes that stand in the way of their being being universalizable as human.[10]

Perhaps this is also why philosophy does not find itself among those strands of thinking that have put the body to the fore in the recent decades. Following Bryan Turner, one of the most ardent thinkers of bodies, it

nered global attention in 2015, when posted on Instagram, leading to a week-long battle against its removal. (https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/p/0ovWwJHA6f, 12. 5. 2025).

8 Moore, L. J., 2021, Revisiting Teaching While Leaking: COVID Edition, *Sociology Between the Gaps: Forgotten and Neglected Topics*, Vol. 6.

9 Wright Mills, C., (1959) 2000, *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

10 Bourke, J., 2011, *What it means to be Human*?, London, Virago Press.

is four social movements that drove the articulation of the body as a topic forward: the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the disability and, more recently, geriatric movements[11] – in a word, movements of people whose bodies singled them out from the generally accepted, valued and recognized form of the human. This, however, must revert us to philosophy. We need to ask not only how certain embodied persons never truly fitted into the frame of the human, but also how their particular embodiments stood in their way.

But let us, for a moment and in a somewhat Cartesian fashion, remove all that is personal, social, magical, or pertaining to the relatively recent history of certain movements, tribal imageries, and Instagram community standards. Upon removal of all potentially deceitful, experiential, culturally specific signs and images, we are left with two resolutely philosophical questions: do bodies that bleed exist, and how is one to think of them? The first question belongs to the realm of ontology, the second one to epistemology. Any reader of philosophy who attempts to grasp the history of philosophical accounts of the body ultimately has to confront these two compressed questions. We may surmise that the bodies philosophers talked about – on condition that they were not the bodies of angels, homunculi or machines (sometimes overlapping with the bodies of animals) – were human, universalizable to all humans, and thus representative of humans. Yet, it seems those were, at the same time, not bodies that bleed. If this is so, where are the bleeding bodies in the hierarchy of being (human)? And are they thinkable as bodies, i.e., as human?

These questions are pertinent not only in themselves because they force us to make room for plurality – and a fortiori equality. They are also of crucial importance for other domains of human action – such as jurisprudence – because to be able to think legally about something we need to be able to *think* about it in the first place. For this reason, a "philosophy of menstruation", a philosophical account on the bleeding bodies, needs elaboration in parallel, if not prior to resolving urgent legal matters of righting the various menstruation-related wrongs.

A philosophical take on menstruation would require a different philosophical approach to bodies. But, as Judith Butler famously claimed at the beginning of their book *Bodies that Matter*, there is "a vocational difficulty of those trained in philosophy, always at some distance from corporeal matters," who "invariably miss the body or, worse, write against it."[12]

11 Turner, B. S., 2012, Introduction. The turn of the Body, in: Turner, B. S., (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge.

12 Butler, J., 1993, *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York, Routledge, p. viii.

What would it mean to fail to take the body into account or to deny it by accounting without it? To offer an example, I will address three such accounts, significant because they come from the fathers of modern philosophy (mothers were, naturally, absent from this act of birth-giving). Here is Francis Bacon: "Certainly, man is of kin to the beasts by his body; and, if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature."[13] This is one typical example of writing against the body, where the body is simply written off as a hindrance, a prison cell of the soul, an obstacle to eternity. Fortunately, however, we are kin to God, so we can put away – at least whilst we philosophize – our ignoble bestiality, reliance on nature, labor, pain, lust, mortality and profanity, not to mention bleeding.

Despite being written off, this body is at least imaginable as a nurtured one, laboring or in pains, if precisely for that reason lowly. In Hobbes's and Descartes's accounts, on the other hand, the body is missed. For Hobbes, "The World, (I mean not the Earth onely, that denominates the Lovers of it Worldly men, but the Universe, that is, the whole masse of all things that are) is Corporeall, that is to say, Body."[14] Hobbes's first philosophical principle aggrandizes the body into the cosmos, leading to the full conflation of body and matter. In Descartes, despite his being on the other side of the philosophical spectrum – as a rationalist and a metaphysical dualist – the body is a thing, something more and less than the ignoble entity Bacon referred to. Once proven to exist, my body is rather only the most intimate specimen of *res extensa*. Otherwise, it is the most certain truth that the mind that I am is distinct from my body,[15] and I, *res cogitans*, "would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist."[16]

Whether it misses the body, or writes against it – in a variety of possible ways – philosophy could profess to thrive without bodies, especially those that are lived – changing, vulnerable, ailing, in the midst of and dependent on the world in which human bodies only occupy space, or come forward as extended. Instead, more often than not, when the body appears, it does so as the body as such:[17] a body that is somehow detachable

13 Bacon, F., (1625) 1985, *The Oxford Francis Bacon, Vol. XV: The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 53.

14 Hobbes, T., (1651) 1968, *Leviathan*, New York, Penguin, p. 689.

15 Descartes, R., (1701) 1985, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 46.

16 Descartes, R., (1637) 1985, *Discourse and Essays*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, trans. by Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 127.

17 It may be argued that this statement does injustice to certain philosophers who tried to think the body differently, or that it refers only to canonical Western metaphysics, strongly marked by Cartesian dualism. This is in part true, since my aim here is

from the embodied I that inhabits it almost accidentally, with the powers to leave it whilst philosophizing, and augment itself into something far grander than the particular piece of matter that the body is, extending or ignoble. This peculiar capacity to detach from the body – whatever is doing the detaching, the mind, the thinking, the spirit made in the image of God – engenders the philosophical subject. The subject is a fleshy mass of tissues and bones, but only accidently. Essentially, it is a thinking substance, a disinterested knower, an ethical subject, or a political reasoning being with rational objectives and self-interests.

Elsewhere, I dubbed this creature a "bodiless body".[18] The Cartesian subject that lost all its corporeal features in the process of application of methodical doubt is perhaps only the most acclaimed example of bodilessness. But bodiless bodies are in fact to be found in various philosophically infused environments. In epistemology, we often speak of the dislocated, disembodied ideals of rational autonomy and solitary epistemic self-sufficiency.[19] These self-sufficient monads are also a staple ingredient in political philosophy and we know them by the name of individuals – the independent, sovereign, self-sufficient, and self-actualizing possessors of their life and limb.[20] The same characters appear in political economy, defined as rational actors and deemed to operate as isolated, "physically disembodied and socially disembedded" individuals who act instrumentally with regard to their abstract preferences rather than physical needs.[21] Ultimately, we find a variant of the bodiless body in legal theory, since the "law's subject, its unit, its person, its basic concept, is an individual. Its oft-

neither to offer a comprehensive overview of all philosophical traditions, nor, for the time being, to depart from the canon. The canon is deeply marked by the rigid mind-body dualism, which is as old as the Pythagorean table of opposites and still survives today, despite some important 20th century challenges to it, crucially those coming from the phenomenological tradition. Cf. Johnson, M., 2008, What Makes a Body?, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 159–169.

18 Zaharijević, A., 2020, Becoming a Master of an Island Again: On the Desire to be Bodiless, *Redescriptions*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 107–119; Zaharijević, A., 2023, *Judith Butler and Politics*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 193–198.

19 Code, L., Feminist Epistemologies and Women's Lives, in: Alcoff, L. M., Kittay, E. F., (eds.), 2006, *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 215.

20 Locke, J., (1689) 1824, *Two Treatises of Government*, London, Rivington *et al.*; Macpherson, C. B., 2011, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Ontario, Oxford University Press Canada; Zaharijević, A., Independent and Invulnerable: Politics of an Individual, in: Rodriguez, B., Sanchez Madrid, N., Zaharijević, A., (eds.), *Rethinking Vulnerability and Exclusion. Historical and Critical Essays*, Cham, Palgrave, pp. 83–100.

21 Hooper, C., Disembodiment, Embodiment and the Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity, in: Youngs, G., (ed.), 2000, *Political Economy, Power and the Body. Global Perspectives*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, p. 31.

stated concern is to preserve the autonomy and integrity of individuals, conceived in a highly abstract manner."[22]

The philosophical subject lives its many parallel lives. To claim universality, it needs to remain bodiless, since bodies introduce particularity, create exceptions, divide and exclude. Thus, if bodies are put out of the way, we arrive at the essential quality shared by all creatures deemed human. The trouble is that bodiless bodies – once they are removed from the universalizable abstraction that cushions their humanity – turn to be bodiful again (and all along). This does not refer only to the single units that each of us is in our fleshy exposure, I-in-my-body, you-in-your-body, but also to other bodied features, one of which is bleeding. Being bodiful also means extending in space, which, contrary to Hobbes's and Descartes's intuition, is not only a matter of physical expansion, measurable in a purely mathematical manner. Bodies take up space in a world in which we are not alone; we do not appear on our own; we do not stand continuously erect; many of the relations we are born into existed before we arrived and will remain in place after our passing. The world in which we are human bodies – and not just physical objects – is a much more complex place that holds us (as bodies), together or apart. Ultimately, this world is replete with histories that form our present. For example, historically, "to be a person, as that term has been employed in a variety of statutes on public legal life, one has had to be a man. It has been an often-unstated but utterly assumed necessary prior condition and hence built into the very definition of the person."[23] Prior to becoming bodiless, the person had a body – so did the *homo economicus* and the individual. In the words of philosopher Mary Midgley:

> The whole idea of a free independent, enquiring, choosing individual, an idea central to European thought, has always been essentially the idea of a male. It was so developed by the Greeks, and still more by the great libertarian movements of the 18th century. In spite of its force and nobility, it contains a deep strain of falsity, not just because the reasons why it was not applied to one half of the human race were not honestly looked at, but because the supposed independence of the male was itself false. It was parasitical, taking for granted the love and service of non-autonomous females (and indeed often of the less enlightened males as well). It pretended to be universal when it was not.[24]

22 Naffine, N., 2004, Our legal lives as men, women and persons, *Legal Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4, p. 624.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 634.

24 Midgley, M., 1984, Sex & Personal Identity. The Western Individualistic Tradition, *Encounter*, Vol. 63, p. 51.

3. Feminist Philosophy and Bodies That Bleed

Not only was there a false pretense regarding universality and independence (from non-autonomous females and various less or non-autonomous males, but also from the [social] world on which we depend in so many ways, most of which we never chose). Independence is preconditioned by another very dubious assumption – invulnerability. An invulnerable body is a bodiless one. To the question – whose body is this? – the answer would be, no one's. However, bodilessness is often (and rightly so) related to a certain kind of philosophically masculine ideal, underpinned by rationality, invulnerability and autonomy.

That such an ideal exists and that it may be termed masculine was revealed by feminist philosophy. Somewhat similar to Midgley, herself not a feminist philosopher, Marylin Frye addressed the reality of this ideal on decidedly feminist terms, claiming that those who possess power also possess the means to define their own reality, from which the experiences – nay, the existences of those who make their lives possible, become erased. Since it was created by men (for men), philosophy created a reality that failed to recognize women.[25] Or, to paraphrase Butler, women were invariably missed or, worse, written against. This is why, for Frye and many others, it is up to feminist philosophers to expose this reality as illusory, deficient, premised on particular ideals posing as universal, akin to the reality of Plato's cave.

As expected, feminist philosophy did a lot to reinstate the body. The subject of feminist philosophy is not only embodied, but bodies come in genders. Such a subject is much less likely to remain detached from the flesh and the world in which the needs and desires the bodies have have become acknowledged. Feminist philosophy shows us that bodies are born, that they need crutches of all kinds to stand upright, that they are nurtured and fed, and that nurturance and feeding is done by a certain cross-section of subjects, whose love and service needs acknowledgment, as does the (private) sphere in which these processes take place. In feminist philosophy, some of the devalued dimensions of our embodiment shine for the first time, now appearing as our main human traits. Crucially, whatever their approach to bodies, feminist philosophers reject their being bodiless. This also amounts to the concurrence that the bodies are vulnerable, and that we are rarely, if ever, in full control over them.

25 Frye, M., 1983, *The Politics of Reality. Essays in Feminist Theory*, New York, Crossing Press.

That being said, one would be right to expect that bleeding appears as a recurrent bodily feature of the subjects given shape by feminist philosophy. Existing as a body that bleeds is a form of existence not accounted for in so-called traditional philosophy, and it may be surmised that its obliteration helped create the figure of the bodiless body. Putting these bodies in thought, registering them as thinkable, alongside bodies not characterized by bleeding, seems an epistemologically worthwhile project with palpable effects in other spheres of thinking and action. In a sense, this seems crucial – if the aim of feminist philosophy (and feminist epistemology in particular) is to create plurality and equality in thinking. Yet, not many feminist philosophers embarked on this journey.[26]

Opening her text on Embodiment and Feminist Philosophy, Sara Heinämaa claims that "feminist thinkers have developed philosophical arguments and concepts to tackle problems that are central in women's lives such as pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, rape, pornography, prostitution, sexual orientation, and the division of labor between the sexes."[27] Menstruation obviously does not belong to this corpus. One may opine that Heinämaa overlooked this particular topic, despite the fact that her contribution was supposed to give a thorough and comprehensive overview, being the only one focusing on bodies in the voluminous and thus far most representative companion to feminist philosophy. Perhaps no such slippage appeared in other representative takes on what a body is. A careful look at four hefty companions, published by Routledge, Cambridge, and Blackwell between 1998 and 2017,[28] featuring some of the most prominent names in the English-speaking feminist philosophy, attests to the contrary. The term "menstruate" either does not appear in them, or when it does sporadically – it is always only accompanying those more central experiences in women's life, to reiterate Heinämaa. I find this telling, because such volumes often showcase what is relevant for a discipline or a specific topic, aiming to encompass everything that

26 Iris Marion Young notes the same in 2005: "Most feminist treatises are silent about the experience and social significance of menstruation." See Young, I. M., 2005, Menstrual Meditations, in: *On Female Body Experience. "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 99.

27 Heinämaa, S., Embodiment and Feminist Philosophy, in: Garry A., Khader, S., Stone, A., (eds.), 2017, *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, New York and London, Routledge, p. 180.

28 Jaggar, A., Young, I. M., (eds.), (1998) 2000, *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Malden, Blackwell; Fricker, M., Hornsby, J., (eds.), 2000, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Kittay, E. F., Alcoff, L. M., (eds.), 2008, *The Blackwell Guide to Feminist Philosophy*, Malden, Blackwell; Garry, A., Khader, S., Stone, A., (eds.), 2017, *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, New York, Routledge.

defines or should define it. In my understanding, such an outcome is not only surprising, but seems to be producing a new kind of misrepresentation of what bodies are.

Indeed, all of the enlisted problems "that are central in women's lives" relate to an embodied life – some to the inherent capacities of bodies that may get pregnant (pregnancy itself, childbirth), some to the effects of those capacities (motherhood, nursing, abortion), some to the exploitation or violence that may happen to them in certain ways (gendered division of labor, rape, pornography). However, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion and rape do not constitute a lived reality of all women, as well as queer, trans or non-binary persons. Many of these humans may get pregnant, many just once or several times in their life, many will give birth, while some may terminate their pregnancies, and yet some may be also exposed to rape, which may happen to some men and some queer, trans or non-binary persons as well. In the event that they do occur, they have a tendency to define some or many dimensions of our embodiment for a protracted period of time.[29] However, although they are by all means major bodily events that in many ways function as turning points in the lives of those affected by them, they also never happen to many persons, women or others whose bodies are capacitated in certain ways and may be violated on that basis.

There is a prior and more universalizable bodily distinction related to bleeding. Unlike any of the inherently corporeal capacities (pregnancy, parturition, and lactation), bleeding does not need activation; it is a self-activating capacity of a menstruating body. Likewise, menstrual bleeding is not about our actions, desires or will (abortion or nursing, and especially motherhood – as a lifelong complex of volitions, activities and desires – are). We make certain decisions based on certain desires or notions regarding if and how we maintain or terminate the effects of our activated bodily capacities – and sometimes we make them in restricted circumstances, with little or no support. Some of the said activations

29 It is necessary to emphasize that all of these "problems" do not have to actually occur in order to have an import for us. Since our bodies live in the social and not merely the physical world, our movements may be severely restricted by fear of rape. Or we may feel deeply deficient if we do not or cannot get pregnant, because a woman is expected to realize herself as a mother – a cross-cultural phenomenon that still has a strong bearing on many women across the globe. Or one may not be able to go through abortion without fear of various kinds of complications, medical or legal, that may profoundly affect our bodily lives afterwards. These and other problems enumerated above have a tendency to shape our ideas, roles, behaviors, etc., that we feel very bodily, even if we never actually go through them, turning them into a bodily event.

may last our entire life, albeit in changed and altering ways, motherhood being the case in point. Bleeding is also not subsumable under any of these bodily activities: pregnancy and lactation, for example, are only possible on condition of bleeding already being there. There are no pregnant or lactating men, but neither are there pre-menarche or post-menopausal pregnancies. Ultimately, we may menstruate our entire life without ever getting pregnant, but we will not get pregnant without a prior bodily feature a facet of which is monthly bleeding. Therefore, all of the concomitant actions of the menstruating subjects, or bodily functions activated by some of such actions, are posterior to the bodily "action" of menstruating.

In addition, menstruation is a designation of one type of body that could not be, and historically was not, "translated" the way other physiological translations were achieved. For thousands of years, it was taken as scientific fact that women and men had the same genitals, except that, "as Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in the fourth century, put it: 'theirs are inside the body and not outside it.'"[30] According to Galen, women were essentially men, though lesser ones, because the lack of vital heat in their bodies resulted in the retention of the organic structures, visible on the outside in the vitally more heated, and therefore more perfect, male bodies. In the Galenic medical imagination, which had its incarnations well into the 18th century, the ovaries were understood and even named as testicles, the vagina was as an interior penis, the labia were seen as foreskin, while the uterus was a deflated scrotum. Menstrual blood was explained as plethora or leftover for nutrition,[31] a surplus that flowed out of the body if unused for the nourishment of the fetus (or in breastfeeding, since the blood not used up for nourishing the womb was thought to flow to the breasts and whiten into milk). Although the ancient doctors believed that women menstruate less in summertime (since they perspire more, as men do) and that there is less bleeding from the vagina, where there are hemorrhoids and varicose veins in women to strike a balance in bleeding,[32] menstrual blood was still not fully translatable into any of the physiological processes characterizing vitally heated, male bodies.

Men simply do not bleed – if nosebleeds, hemorrhoids and accidental wounds are excluded, none of which constitute their being bodily as such, though it does say something about their bodies being vulnerable. On the

30 Laquer, T., 1992, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, p. 4.

31 *Ibid.*, 34.

32 *Ibid.*, 37.

other hand, menstruating bodies on average produce 20 liters of blood over the total of seven years in their lifetime. This "production" is not manufacture: it is the body doing something on its own, without any other factor – including the bleeding person's will – interfering in this "doing". A healthy menstruating person has about 13 periods, lasting on average 5 days and with a loss of 50 ml of blood, for about 35 years of their life.[33] This is, therefore, a constituent trait of bodies that are periodically ejecting blood, without any pre-activation or intention.

I thus want to claim that menstrual bleeding not only belongs to the set of central issues related to the embodiment of women and other people who menstruate, but is central to our understanding of what bodies are. It is ultimately bleeding that stands firmly in the way of conceptualizing bodies as bodiless.[34]

4. Philosophy of Menstruation

A body that menstruates exists. Then why was it for centuries omitted, if not banished from thinking about embodiment? And why does this seem to happen again, even in the feminist philosophical endeavors to retrieve the significance of an embodied life and make it more capacious and equal? Several decades ago, Gloria Steinem published a short satirical essay in *Ms. Magazine*, asking "what would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not?"[35] Her answer, somewhat echoing Frye's take on the politics of reality, is that whatever the superior

33 Droz, L., 2024, The Menstrual Cycles: Philosophical and Ethical Insights in a Powerful Tool, *Humanities Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 31.

34 One of the reviewers of this paper questioned this claim, asking why menstrual bleeding would stand in the way of bodilessness any more than breathing, ovulating, nutrition, crying, aching, ejaculating, urinating, or perspiring. Indeed, a bodiless body does not seem to have the lungs to breathe, brain to signal the bladder muscles to tighten and sphincter muscles to relax; it also must be without inner organs that produce ova or sperm, lacrimal glands that make tears, or neurotransmitters triggering sweat. Yet the bodiless body is not the same as the organ-less body, a body of an angel, or an automaton. A bodiless body is indeed similarly fictional, but it is a foundational philosophical fiction: it is an everyone's body, a *human* body, in control and invulnerable to itself and its environments. A body that bleeds, not being everyone's yet being human, shows the fictional character of the universal quality of the philosophical bodilessness, demonstrating that no bodies can be detached from themselves, cannot be bodiless, while also insinuating that pains, nutrition, and other bodily events, not fully in control of the one alone, belong to the very nature of being human.

35 Steinem, G., (1978) 2020, If Men Could Menstruate, in: Bobel, C. *et al.*, (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, Singapore, Palgrave, p. 353.

group has will be used to justify its superiority, and, vice versa, whatever characterized the inferior group would end up being its plight. Thus, if men could menstruate, Steinem suggests, menstruation would become an "enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event. Men would brag about how long and how much."[36] Their menstruating would be a socially valuable, culturally prominent, and politically protected bodily feature.[37] In other words, all that it is not in women's reality.

I began this text with a vague proposition that many menstruating persons feel their bleeding as a temporary nuisance, as something that is inescapably there – a doing of their own bodies happening to them. And yet, we feel that this is not what defines us. More often than not, we feel split from ourselves, as if in a conflict, as if attacked or abandoned by the very body that one is. Let us extend but also go beyond Steinem's metaphor and ask: how would it be if we first thought of bodies that bleed, and only then of those that do not? This would be a sort of inverted thought-world. When *we* think of *the* body – we, being women and people who menstruate – do we think of the menstruating body? Or do we think of a neutral, "everyone's", bodiless body? Could it be that this obstacle to thinking of bodies, even our own, as bodies that bleed introduces this split, which often functions as an omittance or even expunging we commit against ourselves? Ultimately, what will it take to be able to think of bodies in plural – as this is what I believe is crucial – taking into account those that do and those that do not bleed? Do we need a radical transformation of the symbolic order of imagination for that? How do we create one? And who does?

Few feminist philosophers who attempted to ponder the bleeding demonstrate why this reversal – even in a mere thought experiment or a lampoonery – proves so hard yet so necessary. The first piece of crucially feminist philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, abounds with blood. Beauvoir wanted to provide a conclusive answer to the decidedly

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 353–354.

37 Steinem's words merit reciting: "Generals, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ('*men*-struation') as proof that only men could serve God and country in combat ('You have to give blood to take blood'), occupy high political office ('Can women be properly fierce without a monthly cycle governed by the planet Mars?'), be priests, ministers, God Himself ('He gave this blood for our sins'), or rabbis ('Without a monthly purge of impurities, women are unclean'). Male liberals and radicals would insist that women are equal, just different; and that any woman could join their ranks if only she were willing to recognize the primacy of menstrual rights ('Everything else is a single issue') or self-inflict a major wound every month ('You *must* give blood for the revolution')", *ibid.*, p. 354, emphasis in original.

ontological question "what is a woman?" – and menstruating was a part of it. Bleeding first appears in Beauvoir's overview of "the data of biology", at the very beginning of her account. These data confirm that "from puberty to menopause woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned. Anglo-Saxons call menstruation 'the curse'; in truth the menstrual cycle is a burden and a useless one from the point of view of the individual."[38] The drama that is a woman's body, itself of no concern to individual women (not a matter of her particular desires or volitions), says something about the world in which our biological features have a social meaning, in which we are born female, but become women. In the existentialist vein, Beauvoir wants a world in which no one would have to bear the brunt not begotten by their choices. However, women are beings that, whatever their choices, remain burdened by the species that speaks through their bleeding. In the social world as it is, in which the species has preeminence over individual specimens, the end of this onerous bleeding marks an escape from "the iron grasp of the species".[39] Only then a woman ceases to be the "prey of overwhelming forces, she is herself, she and her body are one,"[40] this becoming one with herself, a woman finally becomes "one", not split and multipliable, which in Beauvoir's opinion turns women into "a third sex".

This is, ultimately, a key characteristic of women's existence. The onset of menstruation is termed as crisis, and it is this crisis, together with alienation and ambivalence, that marks the life of women. This life is not a straight, expansive line, but a becoming punctuated by small, monthly crises and the big crises called menarche and menopause. At a certain point in their life, women even become a sex that they were not, a sex that cannot be accommodated in the neat division of male and female, the main social register for understanding "the data of biology". The body of a woman comes as split and doubled, my own and not my own, belonging to the species, belonging to society, belonging to me, none of these belongings being stable, continuous, undeviating – and then, it (again?) belongs to itself, becoming freed from "sex", i.e., freed from bleeding.

Simone de Beauvoir did not imagine a world in which it would be only post-menopausal women who take their existence into their hands, finally unburdened from essences imposed on them by their bodies. Although she in many ways struggled with what the world was for women at the close of

38 Beauvoir, S. de, *The Second Sex*, p. 55.

39 *Ibid.*, 58.

40 *Ibid.*

the 1940s, she ended her uncanny ontological treatise with some optimism: "What is certain is that hitherto women's possibilities have been suppressed and lost to humanity, and that it is high time she is permitted to take her chances in her own interest and in the interest of all."[41] Crucially, releasing possibilities meant releasing the bodies that bleed from being written off as the vehicle of the species, not vehicles of their own choices.

Many decades later, Elizabeth Grosz presents the body that bleeds as another type of unchosen fulness (bodifulness). This is now not the body in clutches of the species, but "a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order," corporeality as a mode of seepage.[42] The woman's body is a projected liquidity, continuous secreting, unbounded leaking. Women are fluid, men are solid. Women are changing, men remain self-identical (so much so that in a Cartesian manner they can will their bodies away). For Grosz, menstruation is configured as something that goes against the borders of the self: blood pushes through and out of the bloodstream, it leaves the closed system of the body and complicates its boundaries. The blood is associated with "injury and the wound, with a mess that does not dry invisibly, that leaks, uncontrollable," indicating "an out-of-control status",[43] which marks not only the body of the woman, but her entire existence. From the vantage point of the body that can be proclaimed bodiless, there is something inherently inconsistent and anomalous about the body defined by abrupt and cyclically abrupt incursions of the bodily insides. Again, we see that where there should be a flat line, there is constant and repetitive change.

In her essay *Menstrual Meditations*, probably the only piece to tackle such kinds of meditations, Iris Marion Young dwells not upon the ontology of the body, but on its afterlives in the lives of ordinary women. She focuses on the social oppression of women (as menstruators) through shame – something that accompanies women's bodies as rationality accompanies men's minds – and through the lack of appropriate public infrastructures that would acknowledge women's social and physical needs while they bleed. Reflecting on our times in which we are all supposedly social equals, Young says: "For a culture of meritocratic achievement, menstruation is nothing other than a healthy biological process that should not be thought to distinguish women and men in our capacities and behavior. Women have demonstrated that there is no womanly nature that prevents us from achieving what men achieve. We can do anything we choose while

41 *Ibid.*, p. 672.

42 Grosz, E., 1994, *Volatile Bodies. Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, p. 202.

43 *Ibid.*, 205.

menstruating."[44] However, "from our earliest awareness of menstruation until the day we stop, we are mindful of the imperative to *conceal* our menstrual processes."[45] We are socially equal, but on condition that we hide this strange difference that refuses to accommodate itself to us being the same. The same as what? Young says that "the normal body, the default body, the body that every body is assumed to be, is a body not bleeding from the vagina."[46] She goes on to claim that menstruators – in our supposedly gender-egalitarian societies – are as queer as all those who remain in the closet.

How do we think about the bodies when we expressly do not want to miss them or think against them? Will the inverted thought-world experiment suffice? Hardly. If the bleeding body does appear, if it is not missed altogether, it is routinely thought against: as the aggrandized womb, the haunting species, the monstrous filth, the incontrollable seepage, the unbounded body swallowing the self and menacing other adjacent bounded selves, the very abject and the ignoble that must remain closeted. No wonder, then, that one would rather unthink such bodies, banishing them to the huts of unthinkability forever.

Yet, the bodies that bleed exist. In another thought experiment, we may separate them from any of these phantoms, and simply see them on an equal footing with bodies that do not bleed. This experiment is inevitable in order to speak about human rights, legal solutions, fairness and taxation related to menstrual products. We must become able to think of the body and imagine how it also bleeds. In a next step, we need to see nothing deviant in this bleeding, but a mere trait of the many bodies around us. This may ultimately lead to a reimagination of all bodies, leaving the fictional bodiless body forever behind, together with the monster filth and gargantuan wombs. Leaving these immaterial fantoms behind, we may end up reimaging our social world as well.

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44 Young, I. M., Menstrual Meditations, p. 106.

45 *Ibid.,* (emphasis in original).

46 *Ibid.*, p. 107. Young continues, "thus to *be* normal and to be taken as normal, the menstruating woman must not speak about her bleeding and must conceal evidence of it". This returns us to the scene of the *Menstrual (In)Justice* conference, where the very fact of speaking about menstrual blood makes us un-normal, abnormal, at least so long as we are gathering there to reflect on its mere factualness.

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FILOZOFIJA MENSTRUACIJE: TELO KOJE NIJE BESTELESNO

Adriana Zaharijević

APSTRAKT

Pitanje koje ovaj tekst postavlja jeste kako mislimo o telima koja krvare, posebno mi čija tela krvare. Pitanje je filozofsko pošto testira našu sposobnost da uopšte mislimo o takvim telima. Filozofija je, kao korpus znanja, imala malo toga da kaže o telima koja menstruiraju, što, zanimljivo je, važi i za feminističku filozofiju. No, kako ta tela postoje i stoga o njima moramo nekako misliti, ne samo mišljenja radi već i da bismo na njih mogli pravično da primenjujemo određene pravne mere, ovaj tekst predlaže sledeće: da se razmotri kakav je oblik telima davala filozofska misao, napuštajući shvatanje o bestelesnom telu kao središnjoj paradigmi u određenju filozofskog subjekta, da bi se načinilo više prostora za pluralizam i, *a fortiori*, za jednakost u mišljenju o ljudskoj telesnosti. Ključna je teza ovog teksta da upravo krvarenje stoji na putu razumevanju tela kao bestelesnih.

Ključne reči: telo, krvarenje, bestelesno telo, filozofija, menstruiranje.

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