

# Women's Circles and Philosophical Practice

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**Abstract:** In recent years, traditional approaches to education and development have been increasingly criticized as being predominantly oriented towards developing the mind, at the detriment of the other dimensions of human existence (i.e., body, emotion, intuition, imagination). These latter dimensions have been associated with secondary, less important, or feminine aspects. Traditional approaches understand and engage these other dimensions merely from a mental perspective, instead of allowing each dimension to develop in its own space and rhythm. This creates a bias referred to as *cognicentrism*. A case for the shift of *cognicentric* approaches towards an integrative interplay of the mind, body, emotion, imagination, and intuition is presented in this study. This shift is envisioned as happening by pursuing an embodied, immanent approach towards all dimensions or tools of knowing in an integrative manner. As one of the steps towards this achievement, in the context of philosophical practice, the practice of Circles of Women (CWs) is studied. CWs are presented as spaces where the practice is centred on embodiment and immanence, and where the voice of the feminine can be heard, explored, and honored – aspects perceived as lacking in the context of a traditional philosophical practice. Philosophical practice is presented as having a more accentuated presence on the mental, intellectual sphere,

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and so a more versed perspective upon matters of ethics and logic – aspects through which CWs could also potentially benefit. The direction and focus of this study is to advance the need for an embodied, immanent approach to philosophical practice, thus building bridges between already existing practices and communities while acknowledging differences and presenting possibilities of complementarity or reciprocal influence.

**Key-words:** women circle, philosophical practice, cognicentrism, immanence, embodiment, feminine

## **Introduction**

Looking at the world and at society through feminist/feminine, embodied, integrative, or immanent perspectives can bring to light some biases in mainstream approaches to education and knowledge that still remain largely unquestioned. Through these perspectives, the present paper deconstructs some fundamental assumptions found in significant parts of Western culture, Western philosophy, and consequently in Western philosophical practice. More precisely, reason, logic, intellect, mind, cognition –in the Western world they are seen as humanity's most precious tools. This can be observed in traditional or mainstream educational systems' curriculum and in what is considered knowledge or science (Thayer-Bacon, 2000). This can also be seen in how traditional or mainstream philosophical practices focus mainly on conceptual, logic-argumentative reasoning tools in order to define, assess and analyze concepts or hypotheses (Barrientos, 2018).

However, to hold that reason is inherently more important than other dimensions of the human experience – or tools of knowing – such as the body, emotion, intuition, and imagination, is arguably based on a constructed assumption at best, and on patriarchal systems of power and oppression at worst. Indeed, developing and refining reason has served an important element in the development of our society in terms of science,

medicine, industry, technology, infrastructure, and many other aspects. As Ferrer (2003) and Romero and Albareda (2001), researchers and practitioners of the integrative and participatory approach suggest, in the context of the Western culture, “the inhibition of the primary dimensions of the person – somatic, instinctive, sexual, and certain aspects of the emotional – may have been actually necessary at certain juncture to allow the mergence and maturation of the values of the human heart and consciousness” (Ferrer, 2003, p. 22).

Nevertheless, we have arguably reached a place in our development as a society where the repression of these “other” dimensions or tools is not necessary anymore. Today’s challenges are significantly more related to sedentary lifestyles, alienation, depression, eating disorders, body dimorphic disorders, and the increase in perceived relational and sexual dysfunctions (Simons & Carey, 2001). In this context, reason and intellectual refinement are seen as unable to address the abovementioned challenges by themselves. Thus, reassessing the weight given to the mental dimension in our individual life and society becomes increasingly important, and distributing this weight towards each tool of knowing in an integrative manner becomes meaningful.

The purpose of this article is to explore the practice of CWs as a practice of philosophy. Philosophy is seen as an endeavor towards cultivating wisdom, where wisdom is understood as described by philosopher Ran Lahav (2001, p.8) in his article “Philosophical Counselling as a Quest for Wisdom”. This view is expanded later in this article. Furthermore, whether a state of wisdom can be achieved primarily by intellectual means is questioned. This article is part of the author’s dissertation thesis, and only the theoretical framework is included due to space limit. The dissertation also included a phenomenological study focusing specifically on women’s lived experiences in CWs with respect to the tools of knowing (mind, body, emotion, imagination, intuition), embodiment, and the feminine.

CWs have been chosen as a study topic because they consciously engage precisely with those dimensions traditionally regarded as impediments towards finding wisdom, truth or virtue in the context of philosophical practice. However, through a feminine/feminist, integrative, immanent or embodied perspective, these dimensions are seen as immanent sources of truth, knowledge, and wisdom.

### **Mind, critical thinking, cognicentrism**

Throughout this work, reason, mind, and intellect are referred to as those human faculties or tools of knowing which have been used for abstract inquiry, development of objective sciences, and the strive toward impartial knowledge and truth. In this framework, knowledge is assessed and valued using critical thinking, as traditionally defined by philosophers ranging from Plato and Aristotle to 20th century thinkers such as Bertrand Russell (1956), John Dewey (1997), Max Black (1946), or Robert Ennis (1962). Critical thinking, in their view, as interpreted by researcher and philosopher Barbara Thayer-Bacon (2000) in her book *Transforming Critical Thinking – Thinking Constructively*, is seen as a neutral, objective, and thus unbiased method of differentiating between truth and falsehood.

This view is based on two assumptions – 1) knowers can be separated from what is known, and 2) something is inherently either true or false, with no room in the middle. These assumptions have been comprehensively criticized by Thayer-Bacon (2000). In one of her starting arguments, she shows how in *Meno's Dialogues* (Plato, 1943), the main character and philosopher Socrates, although claiming to not know the right answer to Meno's question regarding what virtue is, still relies on an important yet hidden assumption. He assumes that there will be one true answer, a universal essence, shared by all forms of virtue. Western philosophy, which has been famously referred to as consisting "of a series of footnotes to Plato" by British philosopher A.N. Whitehead (1979, p.39), is heavily influenced by this assumption found in Plato, which "has come under great scrutiny by critical theorists, feminists, womanists, third world feminists, and postmodernists" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.19).

Thayer-Bacon continues to walk us through the ways in which different ideologies impact the way we understand human experiences. Marx and neo-Marxists show the important role that social class plays in the experiences of people. Feminists bring attention to how 'mankind' does not equally represent people, but rather subsumes 'women' under the category of 'men'. Radical feminists and queer theorists highlight the category of sexual orientation and gender identity, showing how even 'woman' as a category raises issues in erasing differences amongst people. Womanists and third world feminists find that white, middle-class feminist

scholars define 'women' in such a way that differences of race, ethnicity, and social class are ignored. Postmodernists undergo the philosophical task of deconstructing what counts as knowledge. With all of this in mind, returning to Meno, he is no longer able to give an answer once he agrees to Socrates' criteria for what counts as knowledge. In this way, Socrates silences Meno, in spite of claiming to not know the answer himself. Socrates has a theory of what counts as knowledge, and so, although he claims to not know the answer to Meno's questions, he still determines what Meno can offer as evidence, and so what can count as right or wrong. Socrates' theory is based, in logical terms, on the theory of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle, thus allowing for differences to exist, and thereby for difference from truth (or falsity).

Plato envisioned critical thinking as a logical act, where logic is based on "the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle, which force [the other participant in the dialogue] to reply and think into approved channels" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.34). "Logical division [...] prevents the discussion from being interrupted by contrary views or responses" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.32). This way, logical division makes it possible for one party to be in complete control over the discussion. "The either/or questions that Socrates asks [...] strictly limit the kind of answer Meno can give, [...] and] the price for deviation is ridicule" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.33). Thayer-Bacon notes that if one attempts to speak on their own, they "can be accused of lack of rigor and lack of understanding of the categories of rational expression" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.37). This creates power imbalances which are easily perpetuated in the context of mainstream philosophical practice today. Thayer-Bacon's proposal is to embrace a socially constructed view of knowledge, "as something that is in process – always being constructed and reconstructed", and only capable of being processed with the help of others, "because we are limited, fallible, contextual beings" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.22). Adopting Thayer-Bacon's insight, critical thinking, as it is traditionally understood, is seen as limited and biased, "in that vital tools of imagination, intuition and emotional feelings are diminished or ignored, while our reasoning tool is highlighted" (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p.5). She shows how the other tools of knowing have been associated with women and indigenous peoples, in turn associated with less importance or inferiority in the pursuit of truth, knowledge, or wisdom.

The paradigm in which knowledge is predominantly associated with the mind has been referred to as cognicentrism (Ferrer, 2003). It has been shown to have its roots in the mind-body dualism usually accredited to Descartes (2008), but which has been traced back to Plato by philosopher J. Dewey (1997). In Plato's *The Republic* (1943), Plato holds that our bodies are a hindrance to our knowing, depicting through his divided line model that the lower levels of the line correspond to lower levels of intelligence, which in turn correspond to our physical bodies. The higher levels of the line include truth and knowledge, which are associated by Plato with the mind (Dewey, 1997). Thayer-Bacon (2000) holds that "this mind-body dualism has followed us to the present day" (p.27).

Philosopher Michelle Maiese (2011) presents a further criticism against this mind-body split, this time in the fields of contemporary cognition theories, which, through this perspective, incorrectly hold that the central nervous system is solely sufficient and responsible for consciousness. Thus, she argues for the essentially embodied nature of human consciousness (Maiese, 2011, p.11). This embodiment thesis, in Maiese's view, holds that "conscious minds are necessary biologically alive and completely embodied in all the vital systems and organs of our living bodies" (Maiese, 2011, p.2). In her view, "emotional consciousness is the place where the heart, the brain, and the rest of the living body all come together, and from which action, perception, and cognition originate" (Maiese, 2011, p.56). She argues that emotions are not explicitly cognitive in the sense portrayed by many popular theories of emotion; however, she thinks that emotion cannot be separated from cognition. In this light, the argument for an integrative, embodied view upon the human experience and the necessity of an integrative practice in philosophy starts to take shape.

### **Integrative, immanence and embodiment**

An integrative philosophical practice is envisioned as a practice that engages into the immanent, embodied tools of knowing (body, emotion, intuition, imagination) without placing mental tools such as logic, reason and intellect on a pedestal (Thayer-Bacon, 2000, Ch.2). This means that although reason is 'dethroned' from being the most important tool of knowing, as it was traditionally held, its value remains acknowledged. In

order to do this, space needs to be held for each tool of knowing to develop in its own dimension, in its own rhythm, using its own language to express itself. This is seen as opposed to a traditional approach in which the other tools of knowing are inquired into and understood through the perspective of the mind. Immanence refers to that aspect of knowledge or truth that is personal and deep, and emerges from within (Ferrer, 2003). It can be tapped into through intuition, introspection, and spiritual or contemplative practices such as prayer or meditation, and forms of art such as shamanic painting or intuitive dancing (Todor, 2021a).

Another problem that Ferrer (2003) discusses in his article is that because “not much attention is given to the maturation of the somatic, instinctive, sexual and emotional worlds, [...] even spiritual leaders and teachers across traditions display an uneven development” (Ferrer, 2003, p.21). He exemplifies this uneven development through cases of practitioners who have high level cognitive and spiritual functioning, yet who experience dysfunctions at the interpersonal, emotional, or sexual behavior. Ferrer speaks of spiritual teachers and practitioners, but arguably the same could be said about philosophical practitioners.

### **Circles of Women - Overview based on existing literature**

CWs are said to have existed across different cultures of the globe (Leidenfrost, 2012b; Longman, 2018), and they are known under diverse names, such as Red Tents, Circles of Women, and Moon Circles (Castro, 2020). According to Longman (2018), women's circles are “women-only spaces that celebrate sisterhood and the ‘feminine’” (p.1), being “non-institutionalized, often monthly gatherings, for women to come together and relax, meditate, share stories, partake in rituals, heal, nourish, and empower themselves” (Longman, 2018, p.1). Her study shows how CWs offer a space to women from diverse backgrounds that is found to be lacking in the secular-liberal society, a space where women come to “‘re/connect’ with each other, their bodies, their inner selves, and sometimes with the sacred”, transcending “boundaries between the religious, the spiritual, and the secular” (Longman, 2018, p.1). Castro (2020) in her study refers to Red Tents as “places of acceptance (of self and others)” (Castro, 2020, p.1) where repressed negative emotions and

experiences can be shared, and where women can bond and witness each other outside of the roles they were playing in a patriarchal context.

In Longman's perspective, CWs are seen as a response to "the perceived failure of neoliberal gender ideology to empower women and transform society within secular modernity" (Longman, 2018, p.2), providing a "refuge from contemporary existence" (Castro, 2020, p. 12). This refuge might be seen as allowing women to discover themselves, womanhood and femininity in a new light, from their own perspective and experience, and not as it has been defined by patriarchal societies. This allows them to question contemporary society, its challenges and their own circumstances from a new perspective, one which honors their personal truth and experience.

The aforementioned researchers address several concerns about CWs, holding that they could be expressive of harmful gender essentialism (Longman, 2018) or perpetuating "hegemonic power relations, systemic inequalities and privilege, particularly regarding biological essentialism and whiteness" (Castro, 2020, p.1). Other concerns have been criticizing CWs as merely expressing neoliberal, individualist consumer values, referred to as the 'neoliberal spiritual self', topic raised by Longman and built upon by Castro. Although CWs are usually accompanied by open statements regarding inclusivity and diversity of womanhood, in some cases with "explicit mentions of trans women and intersectionality" (Castro, 2020, p.4), another concern lies with the potentially predominant identification of participants as white, cis-gendered, and heterosexual, and their background regarding women's feminist orientation, high educational level and socioeconomic class (Castro, 2020). In this light, hegemonic norms are considered likely to be reproduced and entrenched. A further criticism lies with the "neoliberal spiritual subject who unwittingly maintains the hegemonic status quo in a quest for personal growth" (Castro, 2020, p.4). In this view, the individual is distracted from material and structural inequities, and any residual problems women experience are repackaged as "their individual responsibility" (Castro, 2020, p.5). Critics continue to argue that the practice of CWs is characterized by consumption and affluence, thus limiting access and strengthening contemporary capitalism (Carrette and King, 2005). Other critical views underpinning CWs under the wider umbrella of well-being sphere and self-help practices hold that they "reproduce normative

femininities [...] with a postfeminist version of the neo-liberal self" (Longman, 2018, p.4).

A further 'red flag', as Castro (2020) shows, revolves around the biological aspect of women in reference to "historical and contemporary threads of essentialism in different feminisms" (Castro, 2020, p13), by which womanhood is seen as strictly tied to the binary female sex assigned a birth. This view is based on assumptions regarding what constitutes a biological sex, which aren't always clearly defined (Buttler, 1993), thus potentially leading to further assumptions about the universality of women's physiological processes, since not all experiences of womanhood are related to breasts, wombs and menstruation (Castro, 2020, p.13).

Gill (2007) argues that the celebration of "women's individual capacities to resist patriarchal scripts" accept without questioning neoliberal values while relying upon a "depoliticized mindset" (Gill, 2007, p.611), perpetuating political apathy. This is a common criticism addressed to holistic spiritualities (Finley, 1991).

These arguments lay the foundation for this work's aim of building bridges between the practice of CWs and the practice of philosophy, seeing that there exists potential for mutual improvement. Traditional philosophical practice could benefit from the embodied, immanent approach from CWs, and CWs could benefit from the philosophical insights into political structures and issues of identity and privilege.

Thus, CWs are vulnerable of being seen as engaging into "cultural or radical feminist principles that in some contexts are seen as retrograde today" (Hollows, 2000, p.10). However, in CWs, "a complete women-centred culture is rejected, and a complete counter-culture based on identity politics for women is not promoted" (Hollows, 2000, p.10). In fact, femininity is re-evaluated in a more "nomadic, affective, and affirmative sense, where agency regarding gender identity and sexual difference emerges through explorative, imaginative, and experiential processes. Femininity is described both in reference to 'traditional' feminine characteristics, for example 'softness' and 'gentleness', and also in abstract, wider terms ranging from "experiencing through the senses, going inwards, receptivity, flowing instead of achieving, and organically connecting" (Hollows, 2000, p.10).

## **Womanhood, Feminine and Feminism**

The term feminine appears mostly in the literature on CWs in the context of a conscious pursuit of rediscovering or returning to a forgotten or hidden feminine in patriarchal societies. Last century's feminist and postmodern philosophers and thinkers have started to shed light upon the implications that patriarchal societies have been imposing on their people, and since then, feminist thought is said to have undergone four turns, known as 'the four waves of feminism' (Rampton, 2008; Rodak, 2020).

CWs are seen as belonging to the now-emerging fourth wave of feminism. One important characteristic of CWs as a fourth wave manifestation is that the insights and seeming contradictions of the previous waves of feminism are deconstructed and integrated.

According to Rampton (2008) and Rodak (2020), the first wave of feminism was known primarily for the women's suffrage and achieving legal aspects of gender equality in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the second wave expanded to touch more areas of women's lives such as politics, domesticity, work, family, and sexuality and opened the discussion about domestic violence and marital rape (Pierceson, 2016). Second-wave feminists placed themselves critically against the first wave's fully essentialist perspective, noting that women have also been exploiting each other, and so questioned the first-wave opinion that being a woman is sufficient for being a feminist.

The third wave in the 1990s started to oppose itself to the very notion of femininity, which was seen as having been defined by men, and was considered sexist. During the third wave, women "internalized male supremacist values" (Rodak, 2020, p.121) and engaged into degenerative, competitive behaviour amongst each other. Having achieved the right to equal opportunities in the workplace, they entered the competitive corporate environments and started playing the game inherently designed by men, for men.

The fourth wave, starting to take shape in the 2010s, is now able to look back on these iterations and cultivate a more conscious feminine/feminist identity. It further deconstructs essentialist perspectives acknowledging the existence of non-traditional, non-hegemonic gender identities, sexual orientations and cultural

backgrounds. Intersectional feminism and queer theory lay the foundations of these perspectives. Fourth wave feminists note that all people have been affected by patriarchal structures, including cis-gendered men, in that feminine aspects have been suppressed, oppressed, exploited or objectified in everyone alive, not just in women, creating an imbalance in social expectations and roles for everyone. The fourth wave is also characterized by a strong online presence and trans-national influence (Rodak, 2020).

The fight for women's empowerment by demanding access to equal rights still is an important process towards a just society, taking place at a political level. However, there is great need for subjective, individual, embodied empowerment, too, which has to take place through individual, personal processes. Political and personal activism and empowerment should arguably take place at the same time, in the spirit of Carol Hanisch's famous slogan – The Personal is Political, published in her 1969 essay under the same name (Hanisch, 2000). In CWs, empowerment starts with the personal, through the creation of 'safe spaces', where each woman can share, explore, and/or find her own truth, her own voice, her own inner strength rooted in her own experience of womanhood and femininity – and explore these experiences outside of patriarchal expectations and definitions. This, in turn, creates a different kind of collective experience, which, in turn, can influence the political level.

### **The Place of Women Circles in Philosophical Practice**

A common definition of philosophical practice is increasingly difficult to be found and agreed upon amongst philosophical practitioners (Raabe, 2001). With this in mind, the practice of CWs will now be mapped amongst existing philosophical practices in order to explore the differences and the potential of complementarity between them. Oscar Brenifier's *Via Negativa*, and Ran Lahav's *Deep Philosophy* are used as references. As already pointed out by Barrientos (2018), the mainstream or traditional practice of philosophy uses a conceptual, logic-argumentative kind of reason in order to conceptualize, define, assess and analyze concepts or hypotheses. This prevailing philosophical tradition, although practiced through diverse methods, is based on: 1) examining arguments and justifications of counselees, 2) clarifying, analysing and

defining important terms and concepts used, 3) exposing and assessing underlying assumptions and finding logical implications, 4) highlighting inconsistencies, and 5) exploring traditional theories of philosophy. According to Barrientos, this approach is considered anti-philosophical, because it narrows the ways in which reality can be seen and thus narrowing the broader scope of philosophy of cultivating wisdom in all its forms. Barrientos (2018) gives three examples of philosophical practitioners who engage into a practice of philosophy based on critical thinking – Brenifier, Lebon, and Kreimer's. For this study's purpose, Brenifier's approach will be analyzed. According to Barrientos (2018), Brenifier's approach to philosophical practice is based on three main activities: identify, problematize, conceptualize. He uses skills such as designing hypotheses, defining and contrasting ideas, and minding questions and answers, all based on critical thinking. Barrientos presents two models in philosophical practice outlined by Ran Lahav – the 'Grand' and 'Small' model. In this context, the philosophical practice based on critical thinking belongs to the small model, because it does not seek to transform the foundations of life (as would the grand model do), rather it addresses specific needs or difficulties and aims to fix problems, thus becoming a 'normalizer' and a 'satisfaction-provider' (Barrientos, 2018, p.2). In this regard, critical thinking seems to be more about smartness than about wisdom, which raises the question if this is indeed what the practice of philosophy seeks to be.

The negative way uses a process through which "the mental process tries to reach truth about its object through negation of what it is not" (Brenifier, 2006, p.29). In the practice of philosophy, as envisioned by Brenifier, there is a tradition concerned with the interruption of mental process and so obtaining silence, thus in this context philosophy is related more to an "ascetic conception of 'being'" (Brenifier, 2006, p.29) than to a kind of science, aiming to show the absurdity of speech. He asserts that "knowledge is in itself immoral, for its pretensions and hypocrisy, its fundamental negligence of virtue, its disdain for the good, and moreover its ignorance of being, its absence of being" (Brenifier, 2006, p.33). In his view, the rational and moral speech is "merely the discourse of convenience and convention" (Brenifier, 2006, p.33). Up until this point, Brenifier's depiction of the practice of Via Negativa seems to actually strengthen the arguments in favour of this paper's values. However, at a

closer look, in the context of this study's purpose of holding space of embodied, immanent wisdom, some differences start to take shape.

Inferring from the way in which Brenifier comments fragments from tales with the famous character Nasruddin, he approves of behaviours of teachers who let students "figure it out, because he trusts them, even though he treats them in an apparently 'rude' way, which can hurt their 'feelings'" (Brenifier, 2006, p.41). In light of this study's purpose of holding space for emotion, intuition, and the feminine, an approach to philosophical practice, which only 'bullies' the participants into realizations, is seen as limited, and could actually perpetuate misogynistic views, be insensitive to trauma-related experiences, and promote unhealthy student-teacher dynamics. Arguably, in the perspective taken in CWs, which is also backed by insights from person-centred approaches to therapy and counseling and positive psychology (Corey, 2014), individual 'opinions' shouldn't be provoked or ridiculed, but honored. By trusting that if given the space to safely share these opinions, benefitting from the unconditional acceptance and listening of others, participants will come to deep realizations about their opinions, or rather, their inner truth and themselves, without the need to be bullied into these realizations.

Ran Lahav's (2001) Deep Philosophy (DP), on the other hand, has more in common with the practice of CWs. In his view, "unlike in most psychotherapies, the counselling session focuses on philosophizing between the counsellor and counselee, while an open dialogue takes place within the session" (2001, p.8). Sharing the concerns raised throughout this paper, in his article, he views the life of the individual in contemporary Western culture as being "to a large extent, devoid of what can be called wisdom" (Lahav, 2001, p.8). In the book that he co-authored, "What is Deep Philosophy?" (Lahav et. al., 2018), he presents DP as a contemplative way of practicing philosophy, as a group practice. This contemplative method uses more tools than just abstract thinking, by tapping into "a deeper dimension of ourselves" (p.1). As part of the Western tradition, groups reflect on fundamental issues of life, however, unlike the "intellectual discourses of mainstream academic philosophy, in Deep Philosophy we reflect from our inner depth" (Lahav, 2001, p.8). While describing the structure of a DP session, Francesca D'Uva, another co-author of the book, shows how traditional academic philosophical discussions "are often discursive and analytic, not enough to satisfy our yearning for meaning.

Discursive philosophy can only think 'about' reality and inspect it from a distance, like an external observer" (Lahav, 2001, p.23). DP seeks to build a bridge between theory and reality, and participants seek to 'reconnect' with their own reality by tapping into their inner depth (Lahav, 2001, p.24). Until now, the purpose and method of DP is similar with methods used in CWs, however, some differences can be observed in what is used as the object of inquiry or contemplation. In DP, mostly philosophical texts typical to the Western tradition are used, and a contemplative attitude towards them is cultivated in order to guide the mind towards going "beyond the words, into a deeper dimension from which the words themselves originate" (Lahav, 2001, p.25).

CWs do not use philosophical texts in order to tap into this deeper dimension, but the participant's own person, their own life experiences, their truth, voice, emotions, body, and intuition in themselves. In DP, while reading the texts, participants try not to analyze or criticize them, "but rather to resonate with the voices of the text, as well as with the voices of our fellow contemplator, in a polyphonic and contemplative dialogue that takes place within the group" (Lahav, 2001, p.24). Similarly, in CWs, participants try not to criticize or analyze what the other participants are sharing, but rather to resonate with their voices and with their truth.

Lahav outlines the skeleton of a Deep Philosophy session, which, although flexible, remains similar and consists of "a centring exercise, an exercise for understanding of the text, contemplative activity, a quiet exercise, closure, and meta-conversation" (Lahav, 2001, p.25). Different kinds of sessions are presented, including "sessions focused on contemplation, sessions focused on understanding the text, sessions focused on sharing personal experiences, and voicing sessions, each containing the basic elements of contemplation, understanding, and sharing of personal experiences. Participants are asked not to talk 'about' their experience, [...], but rather 'from' their experience, as if the words are emerging from the experience while it is happening" (p.32).

Similarly, CWs also share a flexible structure, presented as found in materials from the Global Sisterhood course about CWs (Global Sisterhood circle facilitator course, 2020): 1) Opening and 'presencing' (meditation, or centering exercise); 2) Welcome and introductions; 3) Practice/ritual and sharing experience; 4) Intention setting; 5) Meditation; 6) Closing shares and closing. In CWs, a technique called 'breakthrough-centred sharing' and

sharing while speaking in first person is employed. Participants are invited to share about their own direct experiences, emotions and states in the present moment, avoiding theoretical dialogue and polemics. This way, participants cultivate vulnerability when sharing about their inner worlds, while at the same time remaining centred in their internal, immanent wisdom, and optionally asking for understanding or insights from the group (Global Sisterhood circle facilitator course, 2020).

This immanent, personal experience is celebrated in CWs by allowing it to be 'seen and heard' by the other participants through active listening, act which is seen as being therapeutic and liberating in itself. Most circles use the 'talking stick' as a form of mediating conversation, so that everyone can have the change to speak and be heard without interruptions (Longman, 2018, p.6). The principle behind talking stick circles is that in turn, a stick is passed to each person (or they can take the stick if they want), and while having the stick, they have the space to 'bring in' or share and express what they want, or 'what is alive in them now' (Longman, 2018, p.6), without any pressure, meaning that silence is also welcome.

Another key-element in CWs is the co-creation of the practice as a 'safe-space'. A safe space is nurtured by "[refraining] from giving advice or judgment after one speaks – act which is referred to as 'holding space' for another" (Longman, 2018, p.7). CWs are practiced as egalitarian spaces in essence, where there is "respect for the opinion, expression, experience, wisdom, and knowledge of all, regardless of age, education, or background" (Longman, 2018, p.7). In such spaces, nothing has to be done, achieved, or performed, and participants can take a break from 'doing' and explore purely 'being' in the here and now (Todor, 2021b). These spaces usually contain moments of rest and relaxation, achieved through "simply breathing and slowing down [...] what many interviewees perceived as the hectic, high-pressured, and exhausting lives of many women today" (Longman, 2018, p.7). The interviewees in Longman's study claimed that in circle, "you can 'be yourself', and 'let down masks'; 'you don't have to impress and compete with others', but can simply be 'seen, acknowledged, nourished and loved'" (Longman, 2018, p.7). By doing this, the space is opened up so that the often repressed dimensions of somatic experience, emotion, intuition, and imagination can come to light. Sensitive topics such as sexuality, menstruation, pain, pleasure, pregnancy, birth, loss of

pregnancy, personal identity, feminine spirituality are amongst the common topics in CWs, as described in the author's dissertation (Todor, 2021a).

## **Conclusions**

Due to the potentially fruitful space between philosophical practice and circles of women, the space is opened for further research. As already argued, the practice of philosophy could find inspiration in the embodied, immanent approach found in CWs, and CWs could benefit from philosophical insights regarding political perspectives and issues of identity and privilege. It is worth mentioning that similar circles exist also for men, and also in non-gendered or 'mixed' constellations.

CWs are safe spaces for self-exploration, deep human connection, and engagement with aspects that are largely still hidden or taboo in our society, where women's raw life experiences can be witnessed. Through the creation of safe spaces and the focus on individual, embodied, immanent experience, CWs create a rare to find space in which subjectivity, the voice of the feminine, and women's experiences can be expressed and celebrated without being judged, criticized, or attempted to be 'fixed' according to norms imposed by patriarchal societies. By witnessing and being witnessed through these processes, participants can observe their own internal judgments that might include internalized misogyny, manifested as unconscious judgments towards oneself or other women. They can engage with the largely repressed somatic, instinctual, sexual or sensual dimensions, which are likely to remain hidden, avoided, or merely observed through an exclusively cognitive approach.

Thus, the case for a more integrative, embodied, immanent and feminine approach to the practice of philosophy is made, and CWs are presented as a practice where the traditionally left out tools of knowing of body, intuition, imagination, and emotion are intentionally engaged with and honored, together with feminine/feminist insights and perspectives. The scope of this paper was also to propose a potential bridge between traditional philosophical practice and the practice of CWs, while recognizing that these approaches can potentially complement each other.

*Note:* This article is from the author's dissertation thesis, defended in 2021.

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