This course is a survey of the vibrant philosophies produced from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment (the sixteenth through mid-eighteenth centuries). A time of intense ferment in philosophy, science, and culture, this period was marked by the inseparability of contemplative humanism, engaged experimentalism, the expansion shattering of old frameworks, and the creation of new ones. New participants – women and non-Europeans – emerged who had been largely excluded from many previous philosophical conversations. Early modern projects to understand the powers and limits of the self, to enunciate new styles of philosophical writing and new ways of conceiving language, and to confront the nature of human freedom were paired with the articulation of methods for the production of science and other forms of knowledge that defined the truth of ideas in terms of their capacity to ‘operationally’ transform the world. This included powerful reflections on the world of bodies, ranging from concatenations of ‘dead matter’ to sites for the expression of creative power to milieus for the formation of gendered realities.

The class will consist of direct collective engagement with primary texts. It will be historical in the sense that we will read these not as expositions of disembodied and timeless theoretical positions, but as intellectual artifacts formulated under particular conditions conceived in relation both to their intellectual context and to their historical situation. In other words, we’ll try to approach work by our philosophers not just as evidence of isolated investigators asking particular questions, taking positions, and articulating theories, but also as engaged thinkers who strategically (or sometimes not so strategically) respond to one another and to the world around them.

We’ll read work by Michel de Montaigne, Marie le Jars de Gournay, Mulla Sadra, Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Elisabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, Anne Conway, G.W. Leibniz, Anton Wilhelm Amo, John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Olympe de Gouges, and perhaps a few others.

Students will actively participate in discussion, engage in ongoing informal reflective writing, and write two critical essays.