One myth has it that until roughly the 1940s, philosophy and science were both historically male domains of inquiry producing correspondingly irreducibly gendered forms of knowing. Yet women have been making powerful, rigorous, and creative conceptual contributions to both modes of inquiry from ancient worlds of India, Greece and China through early modernity to the global nineteenth century and well beyond. In this course, we’ll read, engage, and respond to non-technical primary texts by women in the history of philosophy and science as well as contemporary thinkers who consider the relations between gender and knowledge production. Though ‘gender’ in the sense we understand it today was not an explicitly formulated category until the eighteenth century, many of these philosophers and scientists critically engaged theories of materiality and embodiment, knowledge-production, and politics in ways we can now only describe in its terms, establishing rich theoretical models for arraying experience and experiment, reason and passion, intellectual and political equality, as well as simultaneously metaphysical, ‘natural philosophical’ (i.e., scientific), and social accounts of power.

My expertise lies in the European early modern period (so, the late-Renaissance through the ‘Scientific Revolution’ and the Enlightenment) with emphases on method and matter theory, but we won’t restrict ourselves to that era or area. Taking up perspectives in the history and philosophy of science, we’ll engage crucial contributions women have made to the history of scientific thinking in general as well as some of its specific domains. We’ll explore debates regarding the historical gendering of knowledge, the formation of histories of science that excluded women contributors, as well as feminist engagement with more contemporary institutional scientific practices. We’ll simultaneously consider women in the history of philosophy, where they have largely been written out of the pre-twentieth century canon despite widespread contributions. Feminist historians of philosophy have effectively demonstrated that to ignore the significant impact women made in ontology, epistemology, ethics, and political theory distorts the history of philosophy (and also perhaps makes it more boring) and we’ll engage their work to help us try to undo this. Our overall goal will be to leverage historical engagement with work by women in philosophy and science into a richer sense of our own knowledge practices in the contemporary world.

No background in philosophy or science is assumed or required, but if you do have experience or interest in a particular area, you’ll have ample opportunity to bring it to bear.

Assessment: As a tutorial, this course requires your active participation. Within an assessment structure loosely defined by a menu of possible assignments (with room for revision on the basis of your suggestions), students will collectively determine specific assignments and their values.

Bridges competencies: Critical Thinking & Problem Solving / Social & Historical Reasoning