Philosophy is a consistently male-dominated field, one that generally employs males, recognizes their work, and is studied by men. The feminist approach to philosophy, on the other hand, seeks to dismantle this barrier and find truth in diverse ideas. Feminist philosophers recognize that truth cannot possibly be defined solely by the thoughts of white men. The Society for Women in Philosophy Conference (theme: Past, Present, and Future) was a celebration of this kind of thinking.

As a student at F&M, I had not been exposed to the modes of thinking displayed at this conference. We do study some female philosophers in my classes, but they are in the vast minority. Every time my classmates and I are studying a female philosopher, students call her “he” until corrected. We have many open-minded professors at F&M, and the problem is correctable. The majority of philosophy club meetings are 100% female in attendance, with women choosing topics and leading discussions. Women want to get involved; we just have to
let them know that they are welcome. Attending this conference showed me the community of women involved in philosophy and the ways in which it can be used for feminist aims.

The conference was held at University College Dublin from May 17-19, 2018 in Ireland. The fact that the conference was in Ireland gave it quite a distinctive setting, given the debate over what many people were calling “the abortion referendum,” which would repeal the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution on May 25, 2018, allowing women to legally terminate pregnancies. Signs on either side of the debate cluttered the streets urban and rural alike, making the controversy impossible to ignore. Hearing the history of abortion laws in Ireland was a particularly interesting part of the conference.
On day two of the event, four women scholars, Nancy Cartwright, Clara Fisher, Sally Haslanger, and Aisling O’Donnell, led a panel regarding the abortion referendum. The women
discussed how painting Irish women as tokens of purity was a tool for separating Irish identity from British identity after decolonization. Under the 8th amendment, women in Ireland were not able to have an abortion unless their lives were threatened. Many women found ways around this, traveling to London for abortions or ordering abortion pills online. Since the 8th amendment was successfully repealed just after the conference, women in Ireland now have the opportunity to legally terminate pregnancies.

One aspect of the conference I particularly enjoyed were the discussions about changing the landscape of philosophical careers for women. A logician discussed how she incorporates philosophy written by women in her classes in order to show female involvement in the field. Many philosophers expressed their frustration at logic and metaphysics being stereotyped as male subfields while philosophy of love, religion, and other less mathematical subfields are
stereotyped as female pursuits. They referenced a general divide between analytical philosophy being considered masculine and continental philosophy being coded as feminine. This is a manifestation of the stereotype that women are better suited for more emotional fields, discussing politics and love, while men are better suited for mathematical and logical fields.

Trying to involve more women in philosophy is important, particularly in logic and metaphysics, but another part of the feminist equation is to recognize the philosophical thinking that women have been doing for centuries. The philosophy done by women is often not considered philosophy due to the narrow-minded, male-centric view of the field that is subscribed to. In reality, women have nevertheless contributed to philosophical discourse in a variety of ways throughout history, mainly in pedagogy, poetry, theology, and advice manuals (books mothers wrote to their children on how to be virtuous). While they could not contribute to the field formally due to limitations on schooling, women enriched the field in other ways.

Religion was one of these methods of participating in the discourse, allowing women an outlet for thinking about ethics and virtues. As discussed by scholar Ashley Potts from University of South Florida, one woman who used religion as a manifestation of philosophical thinking was St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun and Roman Catholic Saint from the 16th century. St. Teresa had an affect-central view of coming to know God, which was not popular among the medieval scholastics of the time who advised the church on the correct modes of belief. St. Teresa believed in using emotions to cultivate a love of God. She challenged the view that reason is opposed by emotions. In doing so, she opposed views of her superiors, scholastics who had more opportunities for training than she did. As stated by Potts, “Her sophisticated awareness of religiosity was unprecedented given her lack of training.” Religion was one field where women could flex their intellectual prowess within the confines of their gender role.
The impact of women on philosophical discourse was explored by another scholar from University of South Florida, Lily King, who discussed the famous love letters of Abelard, a 12th century French philosopher, and Heloise, a French nun. In their letters, Heloise suggests philosophical ideas to Abelard, and many of these appear in his philosophical writings, presented as his original ideas. An example of this is the idea that actions are meaningless if they are not backed by intention. Abelard famously suggests this, but Heloise was the thinker who first advanced the ideas. This collection of love letters is a demonstration of the way in which women have had a direct impact on philosophy without being credited for their brilliance.

The “Future” portion of the conference theme was best exhibited by a visit to the Young Philosophers Award Ceremony, held at University College Dublin on May 18, and attended by local primary schools who are learning philosophy. The students brought posters displaying their philosophical abilities to be judged by philosophers at the College. An ironic and unfortunate part of the ceremony was that the vast majority of the winners were young boys. There were two occurrences of young girls winning, one in the small group category and one in the large group. Regardless, the Young Philosopher Award Ceremony displayed a continuance in philosophical thought and encouraged students to think about complicated topics such as feminism, politics, and science at a young age.
Particularly insightful potion of philosophy poster created by student regarding good and bad leaders
The historical involvement of women in philosophy demonstrates the consistent interest that women have had in the field. This, coupled with the discussions of the abortion referendum and the visit to the Young Philosopher Awards, made the conference a true discussion of past, present, and future. For me, the main product of attending the conference was an expansion of my outlook on the scope of philosophy. I have learned that philosophy covers a lot more ground than just the theories of Aristotle and Kant, and that other people are calling out the field for being male-centric and closed-minded. Another realization was the sheer number of women participating in the field. Since there are no women philosophers at F&M (except for one newly hired for a temporary position), I assumed that the women in the field were few and far between. I have learned that women are out there in philosophy; it is just a matter of looking for them. Because of this, I have come to realize how unusual our lack of women in the F&M philosophy
department is. When I discussed the lack of women in the department with people from all over
the world, they were shocked. Although men are more prevalent than women in many
philosophy departments, there are institutions taking strides to gain more women in the field. In
other words, not every philosophy department looks like F&M’s, and action can be taken to
ensure that female students feel represented and welcomed.