Course Title: The Modern Crisis of Meaning: Soren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Samuel Beckett
Course Code: PHI 108
Quarter: Spring 2017
Instructor: Forrest Hartman

Course Summary:
The scientific revolution and the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment that followed threatened to undermine traditional sources of meaning and value in the name of autonomous reason. Figures including Soren Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoevsky met this challenge by proposing new ways of thinking outside of and beyond an all-consuming rationalism, while modernist figures such as Samuel Beckett questioned the extent to which attempts to resuscitate what seems to have been lost were persuasive.

Grade Options and Requirements:
- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**
  - Score will be determined by student attendance and participation. Students choosing this option need to sign in on an attendance sheet each week.
- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
  - Written work, probably a 5 to 10 page paper, to be arranged with the instructor according to student interest, will determine the grade.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Tentative Weekly Outline:

**Week 1: 5 April**
Soren Kierkegaard: *Fear and Trembling*: Preface, “Tuning Up,” “A Tribute to Abraham,” and “Preliminary Outpouring from the Heart.” What is the fundamental question that Kierkegaard is asking, and why is he so concerned about it? How is does the biblical story of Abraham enable him to pose his question in a compelling way?

**Week 2: 12 April**
*Fear and Trembling*: “Problems I” and “Problem II”
Week 3: 19 April
Fear and Trembling: “Problem III,” “Epilogue,” and excepts from Sickness Unto Death

Week 4: 26 April
Fyodor Dostoevsky: Notes from Underground. Read it in its entirety if you have time. Otherwise read at least “I. Underground.” Why is the narrator a “sick man”? What has made him “sick”? What has created the fractures in his very sense of self?

Week 5: 3 May
Fyodor Dostoevsky: The Brothers Karamazov (Selections to be assigned)

Week 6: 10 May
Continue to read in The Brothers Karamazov (Additional selections to be assigned)

Week 7: 17 May
Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot, Act I, pp. 1—187. (Please note that the page numbers in the bilingual edition are consecutively numbered so that the assignment is only half as long as it seems.) What is happening in Act I? For whom are the characters waiting? Why is Godot surely not a surrogate for God?

Week 8: 24 May
Waiting for Godot, Act II, pp. 188-357. What more is going on in Act II? Can you discern any difference in the situation of the characters? Why is a second act even necessary? Does it add anything to the “action” of the play? Has anything changed?

Week 9: 31 May
Further discussion of Waiting for Godot and a second play, Endgame. How is the metaphor of an endgame played out in this play? Is Endgame even more “hopeless” and destitute than Waiting from Godot? Are the characters in “waiting” for anything? Is the possibility of “waiting” in and of itself a suspension that is hopeful?

Week 10: 6 June
Review, summary, and conclusions: What came of these projects for finding meaning and value that, however disparate, were proposed as antidotes to the hypertrophy of reason that threatened any fundamental sense of meaning and value in what the existentialists to follow in the twentieth century were to name “the indifferent universe”? Are we finally left with nothing but the theatre of the absurd, the absurdity of life, beyond which is only the full-bodied nihilism of Nietzsche’s “unwelcome guest,” who once, merely knocking at the door, has become ensconced in our midst? If Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky constituted a powerful resistance to despair and the “sickness unto death,” how are we now to orient ourselves if they have failed? How are we, in the throes of technology and now ourselves all living in the “crystal palace” of technology, to live a humane existence?