American Pragmatism contains philosophical models and plans of action directed by hope. In this light, I do not propose any essentialist definition of hope, but instead highlight several working hypotheses about hope drawn from 20th and 21st century Pragmatists. In adopting this line of thought, we may see how the phenomenon of hope works as a “live, forced, and momentous option” (as Pragmatist William James would phrase things). For the present inquiry I will explore the differences in choice, action, and effect when one chooses hope instead of despair in the face of our shared human condition.

What philosophers say about “hope” may sound confusing and diffuse; hence their substantive contributions seem underutilized in relation to their otherwise coherent philosophies. Philosophers, unlike religious personalities, psychologists, and politicians are not the ones we usually turn to for becoming informed or enlightened about hope. For, it seems as though philosophers are better known in somewhat extreme terms, either as life-long melancholic misfits or utopian visionaries, while others fall somewhere in between. I have selected philosophers that do not speak about hope in any one style, context, or historical epoch. What then can we glean from these philosophers, as no two philosophers or Pragmatists are alike when turning their thoughts, pens, and behavior toward the topic of hope?
When American Pragmatists—William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and Cornel West turn a wide-angle lens toward the phenomenon of hope, first of all, one notices that their iconoclastic tendencies and multi-disciplinary research provide a desirable frame of reference for their investigations and life’s work. Thus the outcomes of their work come to resemble a nebula of meanings and values, circling around the ideas and worldly effects of hope and despair.

First, I aim to show that a philosophical pattern and meaning for human hope can be constructed from the diverse types of Pragmatism in the last three centuries, from the 19th to 21st centuries. Second I offer my own existentialist-leanng construal of a pragmatist lexicon for configuring “Hope.” By proposing a few interpretative additions to the philosophies examined herein, perhaps this varied discussion may extend the range of lexic and logoi (languages and theories) about hope.

1. Cornel West & Contemporaries

On January 12, 2012, George Washington University hosted a Forum, “Remaking America: From Poverty to Prosperity” (moderated by Tavis Smiley), which included Cornel West, Barbara Ehrenreich, and other prominent African Americans. Previously in Race Matters (1993) West discussed the worrisome hopelessness, purposelessness, and alienation of Black America. Since that publication West has composed two books on the significance and value of hope—Restoring Hope (1997) and Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom (2008). Again in this 2012 Forum (nationally televised by C-Span), West ardently espouses his stance on hope—that hope must prevail in the heart of humanity, as it has, despite the direst and desperate present and past conditions in America—slavery, poverty, prejudice, and the chronic societal exclusion of Black
Americans, immigrants, and other people of color. Moderator Smiley sparked off a debate about hope by voicing his own view about the contemporary key distinction between “optimism” and “hope.” Smiley finds little grounds for optimism: as he surmises from current circumstances, hopelessness and meaninglessness prevail in America, particularly for the very poor, unemployed Americans, blacks and whites alike. In contrast, West continues to uphold an opposite stance on hope in America. In his public speaking and philosophical writings, West artfully offers numerous past and present illustrations to demonstrate that Black Americans often turn to creative uses of hope, as well as faith and love to pull them through the worst of times, managing to transform and improve their lives, and in turn, the lives of all Americans.

West further elaborates upon the espoused view of the late Vaclav Havel (died in December 2011): “You have to draw a distinction between hope and optimism. Vaclav Havel put it well when he said ‘optimism’ is the belief that things are going to turn out as you would like, as opposed to ‘hope,’ which is when you are thoroughly convinced something is moral … and just and therefore you fight regardless of the consequences. In that sense, I’m full of hope but in no way optimistic” (C-Span, Jan. 12, 2012). Such a stance is consistent with the course of development in West’s writings and speaking on the topic of hope:

[M]ost of our fellow citizens deny this black despair, downplay this black rage…. So now, as in the past, we prisoners of hope in desperate times must try to speak our fallible truths, expose the vicious lies, and bear our imperfect witnesses. This hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better” (Restoring Hope, 1997, xii).

Moreover, in his 2008 *Hope on a Tightrope*, West demonstrates his positive construal of hope by citing and interviewing renowned Black American innovators and their creative contributions in the fields of religion, athletics, the arts, and music (jazz, the blues, hip hop, and rap); hence he
attempts to justify his consistent claim that Black Americans usually find novel and exemplary ways to adapt, sometimes even transcending negative and oppressive life and work conditions.

West’s strong sentiments and reliance upon hope strike accord with President Obama’s triumphant employment of hope to inspire Americans politically and personally. Former President Bill Clinton likewise motivated the American people with the inspiring ideal and feeling of hope. Still today Clinton continues to support and promote the abiding hopes of all oppressed and struggling peoples, in their shared hopes and daily labors to attain better life. Likewise, Neo-Pragmatist Richard Rorty claims:

“There is no contradiction between … identification and shame at the greed, the intolerance and the indifference to suffering that is widespread in the United States. On the contrary, you can feel shame over your country’s behavior only to the extent to which you feel it is your country. If we fail in such identification, we fail in national hope (emphasis mine). If we fail in national hope, we shall no longer even try to change our ways (1999: 254). Further see Rorty below in Section 3.)

If, then, America is to remain a place of hope and dreams, Black Americans and Americans in themselves would need to commit to being hopeful so as not to succumb to despair, indifference, and apathy. Recalling his speech at the Democratic National Convention on August 29, 1996, Clinton reiterated that “I still believe in a place called ‘Hope,’ a place called ‘America.’” (See my poem on “Hope” in the Addendum to this analysis.)

2. First Shoots of Pragmatism (19th and 20th Centuries): William James & John Dewey

William James (prophetically) seems to end his Varieties of Religious Experience with these words: “For practical life …, the chance of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance. The existence of the chance makes the difference… between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope” (in William James: Essays in Pragmatism, 1948: 140). Especially in his essay, “The Will
to Believe” (1948: 88-109), James makes his memorable case for the pragmatic rationality of religious belief, and further for faith and hope over skepticism and fear. James reasons prudentially and pragmatically that the “vital good” and benefits of someone adopting faith and hope outweigh those assumed by being wrong if and when it is found to be an incorrect belief or unfounded hope. As he argues, because belief and non-belief, hope and fear stem from what he terms our personal “passional nature,” these mental and emotional states are equally irrational when viewed from an impersonal objectivist standpoint. For James, then, it is more justifiable to risk being wrong, because it is a lesser error. As the argument goes, regardless one may reap the vital goods and benefits of believing and hoping, in contrast to suspending judgment and thereby perhaps losing such positive inner states, and in addition their actual positive effects in one’s own life and that of others. After all, James reasons, no objective scientific evidence has confirmed or disconfirmed the existence of God or divine attributes, such as divine love and care for human beings.

Next, we turn to John Dewey who adopts the project of James’ pragmatism and takes further in certain directions. Dewey’s central line of questioning becomes “What is freedom, its conditions for growth and realization, its values, and purposes”? (1938: 22). Yet, being more concerned about socio-political reforms, he particularly brings Pragmatism to bear on the American democratic system of education. As Pragmatists not only philosophize but also work toward reform and making innovations happen, Dewey’s pragmatism investigates questions and provides actual answers, for instance, by implementing new educational systems and practices in America. Dewey claims that direct, hands-on experience is required for a socially progressive, forward-looking philosophy and democratic theory of education. Given the organic connectivity between personal experience and learning, his educational theory, and, as a Pragmatist, Dewey
relies upon “Empiricism” for theoretical and experiential scientific support (1938: 25-29). Above all, he demonstrates that freedom is the cornerstone of education, that is, a type of freedom that entails outer freedom of movement, and more importantly, freedom from internal and external obstacles of society, politics, and economic systems (1938: 61-65). Directly below Section 3 further demonstrates Dewey’s legacy and significant influence on Richard Rorty’s socio-political and educational views and utopian vision.

At this point, it seems to be an appropriate aside to invoke briefly two classical Greek authors: the 5th Century B.C. Historian, Thucydides; and 4th Century B.C. Philosopher Aristotle. In his pivotal philosophical history, *The Peloponnesian War* (431 B.C.), Thucydides aims to demonstrate that Hope, as a political, military, or governing strategy does not and cannot do the work at hand for changing one’s predicament and improving the actualities. In contrast, however, Aristotle (pragmatically) warns that taking hope from a human being makes him/her a beast of prey. Given these contrasting classical views, past Pragmatists and contemporary Neo-Pragmatists clearly adopt the positive view and effect of human hope located in the American tradition. Overall, their respective views draw upon the fruits of fallibilism, ongoing open-ended inquiry in the face of contingency, history, and chance. In this pragmatist mix, hope, belief, and love are indispensable ingredients for making people freer, more humane, just, and empathic. In turning now to Rorty, we find a very thorough expression of a neo-pragmatist utopia.

3. **Richard Rorty**

Perhaps to counteract worrisome elements of American malaise and hopelessness, Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, articulates his neo-pragmatist vision of a liberal democratic utopia. In expounding upon and assuming the role and functions of a
philosopher as public intellectual and spokesperson, Rorty boldly attempts to interrelate and integrate: (a) contingency, (b) historicism, and (c) nominalism; and, above all, from an (d) ironist standpoint. Regarding his two-fold notion of a ‘liberal ironist’ Rorty explains: “I borrow my definition of a ‘liberal’ from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use ‘ironist’ to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist,” someone who does not view his or her most cherished beliefs and desires as timeless and unchanging (1989: xv).

As an avowed pragmatist, he urges private ironists to leave behind (at the office) their inveterate doubts and recidivist deconstructionist writings and studious retreats. As a (so-called) universal ironist, Rorty combines one’s private life of irony, with an openly personal and political outpouring of liberalist ‘hope’ for the purposes of greater community and human solidarity. Thereby (he hopes), even private ironists will be freer to live out a life of liberal hope, responding to the urgent call for commitment. Not only commitment, but action too is needed to free other human beings and cultures from being oppressed, humiliated, and suffering (1989: Ch. 4, “Private Irony and Liberal Hope,” 73-95). By voicing and delineating such views, Rorty clearly advances the work of his predecessor, Dewey. As Dewey claims, “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers, and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men” (quoted by neo-pragmatist Hilary Putnam in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, 2001: 19).

Rorty’s work presents postmodern political philosophy under a new light for liberalism and democracy. For realizing the ideals of democracy, and I would add, in living and acting on
the basis of hope, Rorty argues that his kind of neo-pragmatist liberalism is preferable to that of analytic liberalism (1991, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” 175-196). According to Rorty, our own kind of people—Western Liberalist Pragmatists have asked more than once, this simple question: how can human rights go wrong and cause harm? He claims that this question will remain alive until some new resolution or new vision concerning the language, law, and ethics of human rights plants itself more firmly in Western soils (by mixing American with non-American sociopolitical systems). Rorty advises that we seek to better comprehend “how industrialized capitalism and free market, indispensable as they have [become], make it very difficult to institute the [very solidarity]” humans seek from each other around the same globe (1999: 204). Democratic Socialism seems better in achieving our human hopes, because it “will redistribute money and opportunity in a way that the market never will” (205).

Rorty directly summons past accounts of the abundance and variety of human endeavors and enterprise to construct this characteristically postmodern thesis: We make our world through the ever-changing languages and interpretations we make and deploy just as much in the postmodern world of persistent pockets of war (and cultural, ethnic, political violence), as in the modern horrors of two world-wide wars and the threat of permanent loss of human civilization. For Rorty as for West and their predecessor Dewey, these grave matters and options are not merely philosophical and theoretical. In Rorty’s view, it is not that “the degree of utopian hope manifested by the public, or even that manifested among the intellectuals, is greatly influenced by changes in opinion among philosophy professors…. [But, instead] the causal influence [goes] the other way: philosophy is responsive to changes in the amount of political hope, rather than … [political hopes being responsive to philosophy in the making]” (1999: 229).
As a postmodern pragmatist narrative, Rorty’s account of democracy relies primarily on literary and culture studies and criticism, especially of novels, but he also employs ethnographies, journalist reports, and media forms from comic books to docudramas (1989: xvi). This narrative reveals that past great traditions of philosophy, science, politics, and religion have made inadequate progress and improvement in our common human predicaments of pain and suffering. Instead our world continues on in its ever-existing lack of desirable human goods and values like peace and good will toward “others” unlike “ourselves.” Despite the great liberal hope and promises of democratic governments, both in their foundational principles and main institutions, we continue on in our lack of solidarity in private states of irony and contingency. This ongoing deficit permits the increase of domination and oppression of others unlike us, which, in turn, increases human pain and suffering, hopelessness and alienation.

In reaching out to our past depths and debts to liberal democratic governments and theories, a postmodern ‘liberation-pragmatism’ (to coin a contingent phrase), does not center on discrete moments of personal or political choice and chance for self-creation. Rather Rorty’s project aligns itself to its stated task of increasing sociopolitical liberation from inter- and intra-cultural warring, humiliation, and cruelty. These conditions, which generally constitute human suffering, stem from the paucity of human solidarity. This lack leads to constant warring and struggles among autonomous selves, cultures and nations; for in besting “others” unlike “us,” we dehumanize and debase “others.” War sanctions cruelty and, in effect, the destruction of ‘others’ we call our ‘enemies’ (Rorty, 1989: 92-93; also see Smiley and West, 2012: 8-10).

Governments and cultural institutions of the 20th Century and also today, despite being founded and propagated on politically hopeful democratic principles of justice, liberty, and
equality, and buttressed by the ethics of rights and obligations often run counter to the human heart and face of painful cruelty and humiliation of others—for the sake of our own rights and autonomy of self, culture, and state. Particularism, in many of its forms—e.g., cultural chauvinism, nationalism, etc., is anti-democratic and anti-liberal, and so flies in the face of democratic hopes and liberal longings expressed in our very Western ideals of pluralism and universalism (Rorty, 1989: 64-69).

What then becomes of a pragmatist philosophy for a liberal ironist democracy? In its new look we uncover a detailed literary, cultural display of what Nietzsche would call an endless, incomplete ‘march of metaphors,’ without any completion or finality of purpose and meaning. Instead human history and mortal existence is (arguably) ever-generated by creative poets and novelists, rather than by any full-blown forms of Ideology pronounced by philosophers, scientists, theists, and political rhetoricians. In this regard, Rorty provides ample illustrations, and for this present inquiry it is noteworthy that Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, William James, and Cornel West are master literary artists, a few are Nobel Laureates in Literature, and others compose novels, theater plays, dialogues, satire, poetry, rap songs. (In fact, one may argue William James is a better literary writer than his famous novelist-brother, Henry James, for e.g., Henry James’ dense writing in his Wings of a Dove) (1999: 265-271).

Thus for Rorty, literary culture studies and criticism serve better in liberating human beings and increasing freedom. American Pragmatism does not claim, however that creativity, changing metaphors, and re-describing ourselves and reality are sufficient for achieving moral, socio-political progress. More pertinent and central to the tasks of democratic progress would be the unique non-cognitive human resources such as hopes, beliefs, and desires, and not
objectifying theories. For these non-theoretical mental, emotional states primarily must do the work of managing our freedom in forging a more hopeful, just and caring world.

The ground springs for Rorty’s neo-pragmatist narrative show that rhetoric and persuasion, and in short, masked and unmasked power claims and struggles rule the day, without adequate rational argumentation and support. There then seems to be nothing disingenuous or playful in the specific neo-pragmatist challenge to produce something new and improved as our means and processes for living out our private and public pursuits for the sake of solidarity and peace. Significantly then, Pragmatism is founded upon the American idea and energy of hope. Moreover, in Rorty’s case, empathic Imagination and Will replace Reason as leaders of the pack of human capacities. Checking power claims and illicit moves for dominance in inherently pluralist social, political, cultural spheres become paramount pragmatist goals. As such these goals are geared for developing peaceful coexistence through ever-increasing freedom, ever-diminishing suffering, and ever-growing human solidarity. In practice, Rorty’s unifying moment is found in a commonly shared phenomenon of pain, in the human capacity to feel pain and be a potential victim of the pains of humiliation and torment. For Rorty and West alike, hope is the perennial spring for any authentic democratic society. Further, hope is vital for sustaining focus and in following through with our projects for eliminating and preventing as much pain and suffering as possible.

Finally, in assessing Rorty’s hope-bound utopia, human society and governments are left with three indeterminate and never-ending tasks: (1) To propagate freedom, and (2) To reduce pain, in order to (3) Increase human solidarity. In addition, to conceive and bring about a better kind of globalization, one that is consistent with these three human hopes and aspirations, Rorty
proposes that education become our foremost objective: an education aimed at halting the current momentum and victimization of human beings and our natural world (1999: Ch. 17. “Globalization, the Politics of Identity and Social Hope,” 230-239).

We may now return to reconnect with the beginning of our inquiry. Regarding the ‘Prophetic Pragmatism’ of Cornel West, consider how he concludes *Hope on a Tightrope*:

> “Those who have never despaired have neither lived nor loved. Hope is inseparable from despair. Those of us who truly hope make despair a constant companion whom we outwrestle every day owing to our commitment to justice, love, and hope” (2008: 217). Similarly then, I conclude the foregoing analysis with yet another contemporary appropriation of Pragmatism, namely, that of Kathryn Schultz in *Being Wrong* (2010); (see quotations below). Schultz invokes the late Richard Rorty, Wittgenstein, and Bertrand Russell in tracking William James legacy. She deems this legacy to be a viable and valuable vision and framework to comprehend human beings and the human condition. As Schultz maintains, Pragmatism not only continues to influence a variety of notable philosophers and public intellectuals, but also till this day provides a sound basis for belief and hope in confronting right and wrong, truth and error:

As James puts it, sometimes unswerving beliefs ‘help to make the truth which they declare’ …. ‘At the foundation of well-founded belief,’ Wittgenstein wrote, ‘lies belief that is not founded,’ meaning neither well- or ill-founded (164-166). … All wrongness is optimism… that is why error, even though sometimes feels like despair, is actually much closer in spirit to hope. We get things wrong because we have an enduring confidence in our minds; and we face up to that wrongness in the faith that, having learned something, we will get it right the next time.  [Schultz even ends her book by quoting Rorty’s analysis]: In this optimistic vein, embracing our fallibility is simply a way of paying homage to the late philosopher Richard Rorty, ‘the permanent possibility of someone having a better idea.’ The great advantage of realizing that we have told a story about the world that is rich realizing that we can tell of better ones, with better ideas, better possibilities…[and] people’” (338-339).

Pragmatism therefore remains an open-ended inquiry and fruitful program not only for conceiving but practicing hope in our choices and action plans. That is to say, in confronting our
freedom we have to make difficult choices about truth and error, justice and injustice, wherein our very own democratic ideals and humaneness hangs in the balance between morally centered progress or lack thereof.

4. A Selective Philosophical Lexicon on 'Hope'

Categorized A-D, thematically and linguistically

A. Linguistic/ Pragmatist Hope
- ‘X’ist Hope /or Hopist
- CommuniHope/Solidarity
- Liberalist vs. Royalist vs. Loyalist Hope
- Holistic/Healing Hope
- UtopImagineHope

B. Hopeism/Hopistry
- SocraticHope
- SophieHopia: sophia/wisen hope wizardry
- SupraHope/Sacred
- AtheosHope
- Hopistry/Hopeism
- HopeDeontology
- EscapistHope: Buddhist vs. scientist; spiritualist vs. medical/ curative
- Abstractive vs. Factoid DataHope
- SubjunctHope: wish, dream, desire
- Entrance/ ExitHope

C. CommonSensibilityHope
- SpontaneoHope
- InnatistHope
- IntuitSensaHope
- Synaptic/Neuro/NaturalHope
- Hopeutilitarian-Futilitarian

D. WellWishingHope
- AppealingHope
- Hope- a- word/a-day
- Take-a-lookHope: Gmail/Twitter/Face-a-book
- HallmarkianHope: iteration, reiteration
ADDENDUM: Two Poems about Hope

As a philosophy professor, I write poems that seem to fall under three separate categories: the personal, the political, and the philosophical. This particular poem has a long history: Originally I wrote it during the 1996 U.S. Presidential Conventions in August, when 'Bill' Clinton and Former Senator 'Bob' Dole were the Democratic and Republican candidates for the Presidency. In November 1996, President Clinton was re-elected to serve his infamous second term as President, and the rest is history. I slightly revised it again on November 4, 2004, two days after the 2004 defeat of the Democratic Presidential candidate, John Kerry, to George W. Bush. I returned to revisit my poetry manuscript, and somewhat unconsciously proceeded to edit this poem, thinking of President Obama in 2012 in conjunction with the Viterbo Conference theme of "Hope".

1. Where Democracy Lives

In Hope? Where Hope is?
Not Bill's or Bob's or Obama's place
To Say where Hope Lives, in mostly public eyes,
These democratic lives expose our most private, stern parts of personas, quite coiffured, and costumed. They step full speed ahead, God says Go Forward, and "Hope is on the Way,"
While We defy logic, continue to call "Hope" a place,
It is not Just Some Name, surely not a 'Thing' imaginable,
But a Qualia sorely sought; no substantial piece of land,
Not a Substance of any Sort, like someone's hometown,
Or your best friend's name, but your Aspirations,
Or someone else's, speaking of the moment,
For the moment only.
'Help' chooses 'Hope'; Ropes it in;
Turns hopes in to a Show, 'Whose Hope is It,
Anyway?' Do You have the right to know? To speak The moment?
To know how to send some to Mars, others to the moon,
But not, to turn hope's tides around,
By fixing that tilt of the
Solid Glow We call Moon?
What is Hope, here, tonight?
What becomes of Hope, when I Turn on the TV, Tonight?

By Mary Lenzi, updated revision for this 2012 Conference
2. Viterbo's Lonely Hearts, Vertigo & Lost Verve**

Sing to yourself,
write if you will,
you gnawing heart,
Miss Lonelyhearts.
you want what you will,
and you will that I want what you will.

So will yourself to sleep,
humming some tired, trite old tunes
from records past and newly broken,
bankrupt you alone for the night,
not even a one-in-a-million chance for
'Do you Hear What I Hear?' to occur as
Unforgiven/givable,
Unforgettable/you....

Believe me,
not the sights, smells, tastes,
she misses but the touch
left only with the sounds of these lines
vanishing
her favorite titles dispersing ebbing tides
etchings scratched out with the times
but flowing still,
not yet dry,
slowing down, never gone,--
that waving pass of the sun setting,
only to find just one lost thing to find a fix
for the lilting fatigue of long-forgotten lines.

Grease for the grill,
for Mr. West, 'Miss Lonelyhearts,'
again more Mill on the Floss,
who listens to rags on her old 78 rpm player,
records like "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,"
"The Day (before) the Music Died,"
ragged rhymes, old rags,
from a one man ragged-ty-time band to the next
(plays on) for a no-longer gyrating old hag.
As my heart stops, my head keeps rolling,
going more in to tunes over time 78s-48s-28s,,her age in reverse...
when Swept Away,
al of a sudden she says,
- for all she feels today-
'Euthanize me,'
Forgiveness, and Mercy-(me).

By Mary Lenzi, revised for Conference, March 30, 2012

** I did not have any time to present this poem during our session. My poem originally mentions Miss Lonelyhearts merely as a common phrase and reference. I revised it inserting the novel's author Nathaniel West, on behalf of the other presenter in the session, Lyon Evans, Professor and Chair of English, Viterbo University. His presentation directly connected Nathaniel West's novel, Miss Lonelyhearts with the presentation of Amy Dickinson, the Conference keynote speaker, who writes the advice columnist, "Ask Amy," for the Chicago Tribune, and is also a New York Times bestselling author.

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