

Necessary Liberal Preconditions

A Master Thesis Proposal

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Background

With computer programs melded into almost every aspect of human life, we often not only require their efficiency, but also their correctness. We would like to know for sure that our programs deliver the desired results, and do not run forever. This is called *total correctness*. To know “for sure”, we could verify programs using formal methods that have been developing for decades. One of such methods are *Hoare Triples* [4] proposed by Tony Hoare in 1969. A Hoare Triple contains three parts: a precondition, a program, and a postcondition. They are written as such: $\{F\}C\{G\}$.¹ It states that if the system is in a state that satisfies the precondition, then the state after the execution of the program will satisfy the postcondition, provided that the program terminates. This is called *partial correctness*.

Originally, Hoare Triples only deals with deterministic programs in a top-to-down manner, but non-determinism can be added in a sensible way [2]. Here, Dijkstra presented the *weakest precondition* transformer (wp): starting with a postcondition, it works backwards and “guesses” what the precondition can be. wp is concerned with total correctness and is related to Hoare Triples by an implication:²

$$\forall G. G \implies wp.C.F : \{G\}C\{F\}$$

This connection not only tells us that

- given $wp.C.F$, any predicate G that implies it can be the precondition of a valid Hoare Triple: $\{G\}C\{F\}$;

it also shows when Hoare Triple will guarantee total correctness:

- given a valid Hoare Triple $\{G\}C\{F\}$, if its precondition G implies $wp.C.F$, then $\{G\}C\{F\}$ is valid for total correctness.

Sometimes, however, we deem nontermination a good behaviour, and proving partial correctness suffices. The *weakest liberal precondition* transformer [3] can be used in such occasions: if the system is in a state satisfying $wlp(C, F)$, then either F is reachable after the termination of C , or C does not terminate. wlp directly relates to Hoare Triples via an implication:

$$\forall G. G \implies wlp(C, F) : \{G\}C\{F\}$$

G is then called the *sufficient liberal precondition*, and finding it means we can prove the absense of errors in the program (if it terminates). In contrast, the *necessary liberal precondition* G (where $wlp(C, F) \implies G$) tells us that the system will not satisfy the postcondition F , once G is violated. Cousot et al. studied the matter from a practical perspective [1], they proposed inference tools and experimented in industrial codes.

¹Originally it was written as $F\{C\}G$, but now it is often written with brackets around conditions instead of the program.

²Here $wp.C.F$ is a function written in lambda-calculus style, it can be seen now as a function $wp(C, F)$. This form of writing proves to be simple and elegant in the upcoming sections.

In this thesis, we aim to research this matter further with a more theoretical view. We would like to propose a proof system in the flavour of [5], but instead of defining big-step semantics, we use Dijkstra’s *guarded command language* (GCL) [2] and hopefully come up with a proof system. By doing so with GCL syntax, we hope to prove the completeness and soundness of the proof system using structural induction.

Rather than the usual qualitative reasoning using logical predicates, we would like to study in a quantitative setting using functions that represent quantities such as expectations of program variables. While predicates map program states to true or false, functions map program states to $\mathbb{R}^{\pm\infty}$, real numbers extended with (negative) infinity. In this setting, not only are infinities clear indication for nontermination, the transformers can also express more such as flow of quantitative information [6].

References

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