

# std::optional<T&>

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Audience: LEWG  
Reply-to: Steve Downey  
<[sdowney@gmail.com](mailto:sdowney@gmail.com), [sdowney2@bloomberg.net](mailto:sdowney2@bloomberg.net)>

## 1 Abstract

An optional over a reference such that the post condition on assignment is independent of the engaged state, always producing a rebound reference, and assigning a U to a T is disallowed by `static_assert` if a bind a U can not be bound to a T&.

## 2 Comparison table

Before	After
<pre>std::shared_ptr&lt;Cat&gt; cat = find_cat("Fido"); // or std::map&lt;std::string, Cat&gt;::iterator cat     = find_cat("Fido"); // or Cat* cat = find_cat("Fido");</pre>	<pre>std::optional&lt;Cat&amp;&gt; cat = find_cat("Fido");</pre>
Before	After
<pre>std::optional&lt;Cat*&gt; c = find_cat("Fido"); if (c) {     if (*c) {         *c = Cat("Fynn", color::orange);     } }</pre>	<pre>std::optional&lt;Cat&amp;&gt; c = find_cat("Fido"); if (c) {     *c = Cat("Fynn", color::orange); } //or o.transform([&amp;](auto c&amp;){     c = Cat("Fynn", color::orange); });</pre>

## 3 Motivation

Optionals holding references are common other than in the standard library's implementation. The desire for such a feature is well understood, and many optional types in commonly used libraries provide it, with the semantics proposed here. One standard library implementation already provides an implementation of `std::optional<T&>` but disables its use, because the standard forbids it.

The research in JeanHeyd Meneide's *References for Standard Library Vocabulary Types - an optional case study*. [P1683R0] shows conclusively that rebound semantics are the only safe semantic as assign through on engaged

is too bug-prone. Implementations that attempt assign-through are abandoned. The standard library should follow existing practice and supply an `optional<T&>` that rebinds on assignment.

Additional background reading on `optional<T&>` can be found in JeanHeyd Meneide's article *To Bind and Loose a Reference* [BindRef].

There is a principled reason not to provide a partial specialization over `T&` as the semantics are in some ways subtly different than the primary template. Assignment may have side-effects not present in the primary, which has pure value semantics. However, I argue this is misleading, as reference semantics often has side-effects. The proposed semantic is similar to what an `optional<std::reference_wrapper<T>>` provides, with much greater usability.

There are well motivated suggestions that perhaps instead of an `optional<T&>` there should be an `optional_ref<T>` that is an independent primary template. This proposal rejects that. We need a policy over all sum types as to how reference semantics should work, as optional is a variant over `T` and monostate. That the library sum type can not express the same range of types as the product type, tuple, is an increasing problem as we add more types logically equivalent to a variant. The template types `optional` and `expected` should behave as extensions of `variant<T, monostate>` and `variant<T, E>`, or we lose the ability to reason about generic types.

That from `std::tuple<Args...>` we can't guarantee that `std::variant<Args...>` is valid is a problem, and one that reflection can't solve. A language sum type could, but we need agreement on the semantics.

The semantics of a variant with a reference are as if it holds the address of the referent when referring to that referent. All other semantics are worse. Not being able to express a `variant<T&>` is inconsistent, hostile, and strictly worse than disallowing it.

In freestanding environments or for safety-critical libraries, an optional type over references is important to implement containers, that otherwise as the standard library either would cause undefined behavior when accessing a non-available element, throw an exception, or silently create the element. Returning a plain pointer for such an optional reference, as the core guidelines suggest, is a non-type-safe solution and doesn't protect in any way from accessing a non-existing element by a `nullptr` dereference. In addition, the monadic APIs of `std::optional` makes is especially attractive by streamlining client code receiving such an optional reference, in contrast to a pointer that requires an explicit `nullptr` check and de-reference.

## 4 Design

The design is straightforward. The `optional<T&>` holds a pointer to the underlying object of type `T`, or `nullptr` if the optional is disengaged. The implementation is simple, especially with C++20 and up techniques, using concept constraints. As the held pointer is a primitive regular type with reference semantics, many operations can be defaulted and are noexcept by nature. See [https://github.com/steve-downey/optional\\_ref](https://github.com/steve-downey/optional_ref) and [https://github.com/steve-downey/optional\\_ref/blob/main/src/smd/optional/optional.h](https://github.com/steve-downey/optional_ref/blob/main/src/smd/optional/optional.h) for a reference implementation. The `optional<T&>` implementation is less than 200 lines of code, much of it the monadic functions with identical textual implementations with different signatures and different overloads being called.

In place construction is not supported as it would just be a way of providing immediate life-time issues.

## 5 Shallow vs Deep const

There is some implementation divergence in optionals about deep const for `optional<T&>`. That is, can the referred to `int` be modified through a `const optional<int&>`. Does `operator->()` return an `int*` or a `const int*`, and does `operator*()` return an `int&` or a `const int&`. I believe it is overall more defensible if the `const` is shallow as it would be for a `struct ref {int * p;} where the constness of the struct ref does not affect if the p pointer can be written through. This is consistent with the rebinding behavior being proposed.`

Where deeper constness is desired, `optional<const T&>` would prevent non const access to the underlying object.

## 6 Wording

Modify 22.5 Optional Objects

add

```
Class template optional[optional.optional_ref]
General[optional.optional_ref.general]

namespace std {
namespace std {
    template<class T>
    class optional<T&&> {
    public:
        using value_type = T;
        [optional_ref.ctor], constructors
        constexpr optional() noexcept;
        constexpr optional(nullopt_t) noexcept;
        constexpr optional(const optional&) noexcept;
        constexpr optional(optional&&) noexcept;
        template<class U = T>
            constexpr optional(U&&);
        template <class U>
            constexpr explicit optional(const optional<U>& rhs) noexcept;

        [optional_ref.dtor], destructor
        constexpr ~optional();

        [optional_ref.assign], assignment
        constexpr optional& operator=(nullopt_t) noexcept;
        constexpr optional& operator=(const optional&);
        constexpr optional& operator=(optional&&) noexcept(/* see below */);
        template <class U = T>
            constexpr optional& operator=(U&&);
        template <class U>
            constexpr optional& operator=(const optional<U>&);
        template <class U>
            constexpr optional& operator=(optional<U>&&);

        [optional_ref.swap], swap
        constexpr void swap(optional&) noexcept(/* see below */);

        [optional_ref.observe], observers
        constexpr T*      operator->() const noexcept;
        constexpr T&      operator*() const& noexcept;
        constexpr T&&      operator*() const&& noexcept;
        constexpr explicit operator bool() const noexcept;
        constexpr bool     has_value() const noexcept;
        constexpr T&       value() const&;
        constexpr T&& value() const&&;
        template <class U>
            constexpr T value_or(U&&) const&;

        [optional_ref.monadic], monadic operations
        template <class F>
```

```

        constexpr auto and_then(F&& f) &;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto and_then(F&& f) &&;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto and_then(F&& f) const&;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto and_then(F&& f) const&&;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto transform(F&& f) &;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto transform(F&& f) &&;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto transform(F&& f) const&;
template <class F>
    constexpr auto transform(F&& f) const&&;
template <class F>
    constexpr optional or_else(F&& f) &&;
template <class F>
    constexpr optional or_else(F&& f) const&;

[optional_ref.mod], modifiers
    constexpr void reset() noexcept;
private:
    T *val;           // exposition only

```

Constructors[optional\_ref.ctor]

```

constexpr optional() noexcept;

constexpr optional(nullopt\_t) noexcept;

```

<sup>1</sup> *Postconditions:* \*this does not contain a value.

<sup>2</sup> *Remarks:* No contained value is initialized. For every object type T these constructors are **constexpr** constructors ([dcl.constexpr]).

```
constexpr optional(const optional& rhs);
```

<sup>3</sup> *Effects:* Initializes val with the value of rhs.val

<sup>4</sup> *Postconditions:* rhs.has\_value() == this->has\_value().

<sup>5</sup> *Remarks:* The constructor is trivial.

```
constexpr optional(optional&&) noexcept;
```

<sup>3</sup> *Effects:* Initializes val with the value of rhs.val

<sup>4</sup> *Postconditions:* rhs.has\_value() == this->has\_value().

<sup>5</sup> *Remarks:* The constructor is trivial.

```

template<class U = T>
    constexpr optional(U&&);

```

<sup>3</sup> *Constraints:*

(3.1) – !is\_optional<decay\_t<U>>::value is true

<sup>3</sup> *Mandates:*

(3.1) – `std::is_constructible_v<std::add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U>`;

(3.1) – `std::is_lvalue_reference<U>::value`

3 *Effects*: Initializes `val` with the address of `u`

4 *Postconditions*: `this->has_value() == true`.

```
template <class U>
constexpr explicit optional(const optional<U>& rhs) noexcept;
```

3 *Constraints*:

(3.1) – `!is_optional<decay_t<U>>::value` is true

3 *Mandates*:

(3.1) – `std::is_constructible_v<std::add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U>`;

(3.1) – `std::is_lvalue_reference<U>::value`

3 *Effects*:

Destructor [`optional_ref.dtor`]

```
constexpr ~optional();
```

5 *Remarks*: The destructor is trivial.

## 7 References

[BindRef] JeanHeyd Meneide. To Bind and Loose a Reference.

<https://thephd.dev/to-bind-and-loose-a-reference-optional>

[P1683R0] JeanHeyd Meneide. 2020-02-29. References for Standard Library Vocabulary Types - an optional case study.

<https://wg21.link/p1683r0>