# Nominal techniques as an Agda library

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**Introduction** Nominal techniques [8] provide a mathematically principled approach to dealing with names and variable binding in programming languages (amongst other applications). However, integrating these ideas in a practical and widespread toolchain has been slow, and we perceive a chicken-and-egg problem: there are no users for nominal techniques, because nobody has implemented them, and nobody implements them because there are no users. This is a pity, but it leaves a positive opportunity to set up a virtuous circle of broader understanding, adoption, and application of this beautiful technology.

This paper explores an attempt to make nominal techniques accessible as a library in the Agda proof assistant and programming language [9], which can be viewed as a port of the first author's Haskell `nom` package [6], although that would be an injustice as its purpose is two-fold:

1. provide a convenient library to use nominal techniques in Your Own Agda Formalisation
2. study the meta-theory of nominal techniques in a rigorous and *constructive* way

A solution to Goal 1 must be ergonomic, meaning that a *technical* victory of implementing nominal ideas is not enough; we further require a *moral* victory that the overhead be acceptable for practical (and preferably larger-scale) systems. Apart from this being a literate Agda file, our results have been mechanised and are publicly accessible:

https://omelkonian.github.io/nominal-agda/

**Nominal setup** We conduct our development under some abstract type of **atoms**, satisfying certain constraints, namely decidable equality and being infinitely enumerable.[1]. A user could provide a concrete instantiation; as numbers for instance. This can be realised in Agda using *module parameters*:

```
module _ (Atom : Type) {{ _ : DecEq Atom }} {{ _ : Enumerable∞ Atom }} where
  И : (Atom → Type) → Type
  И φ = ∃ λ (xs : List Atom) → (∀ y → y ∉ xs → φ y)
```

The И **quantifier** enforces that a predicate holds for all but finitely many atoms, and **swapping** of two atoms can be performed on any type, subject to some laws:

```
record Swap (A : Type) : Type where
  field swap : Atom → Atom → A → A
  ⦅_↔_⦆_ = swap
```

```
instance
  ↔Atom : Swap Atom
  ↔Atom .swap x y z =
    if z == x then y else if z == y then x else z
```

```
record SwapLaws : Type where
  field swap-id   : ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕒 ⦆ x ≡ x
        swap-rev  : ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕓 ⦆ x ≡ ⦅ 𝕓 ↔ 𝕒 ⦆ x
        swap-sym  : ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕓 ⦆ ⦅ 𝕓 ↔ 𝕒 ⦆ x ≡ x
        swap-swap : ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕓 ⦆ ⦅ 𝕔 ↔ 𝕕 ⦆ x ≡ ⦅ ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕓 ⦆ 𝕔 ↔ ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕓 ⦆ 𝕕 ⦆ ⦅ 𝕒 ↔ 𝕓 ⦆ x
```

We only need to provide instances for the base case of *atoms* (whence the decidable equality), and *abstractions* (coming up next). From this we can systematically derive swapping definitions for all user-defined types, using a compile-time macro/tactic (c.f. the case study later on).

[1]...also known as "unfiniteness" in a recent nominal mechanization of the locally nameless approach [10].

One particularly useful family of axioms in equivariant ZFA foundations [5] is that swapping distributes everywhere (constructors, functions, type formers, etc..) e.g. the special case for swapping itself being swap-swap. It is consistent to axiomatize this generalized notion of distributivity for swap and we do so by means of a tactic that realises this *axiom scheme*.

It is usually the case that we are working some inductive type family, which is guaranteed to have **finite support** which we can concisely express using the new quantifier: И² λ 𝕒 𝕓 → swap 𝕓 𝕒 $x$ ≡ $x$. We can then define **equivariant** elements that admit the empty support, as well as an operation to generate fresh atoms freshAtom : $A \to Atom$— whence the module requirement that atoms are infinitely enumerable. Agda is constructive, so freshAtom is constructive too, which is different from how fresh atoms are used in (non-constructive) set theories. An **abstraction** is just a pair of an atom and an element:

```
Abs A = Atom × A

conc : Abs A → Atom → A
conc (𝕒 , x) 𝕓 = swap 𝕓 𝕒 x
```

```
instance
  ↔Abs : Swap (Abs A)
  ↔Abs .swap 𝕒 𝕓 (𝕔 , x) = (swap 𝕒 𝕓 𝕔 , swap 𝕒 𝕓 x)
```

Note that we can also provide a *correct-by-construction* and *total* concretion function. In nominal techniques based on Fraenkel-Mostowski set theory [8] this is impossible, and it seems to be a novel observation that in a constructive setup a total concretion function is fine (essentially because *freshAtom* is constructive).

**Case study** Once equipped with all expected nominal facilities, in particular *atoms* and *atom abstractions*, it is easy to define terms in **untyped λ-calculus** without mentioning de Bruijn indices or anything of that sort. For the sake of ergonomics and efficient theorem proving, we provide a meta-programming macro — based on *elaborator reflection* [2] — that is able to automatically derive the implementation of swapping of any type based on its structure.

```
data Term : Type where
  `_    : Atom → Term
  _·_   : Term → Term → Term
  λ_    : Abs Term → Term
unquoteDecl ↔Term =
  DERIVE Swap [ quote Term , ↔Term ]
```

```
data _≈_ : Term → Term → Type where
  ν≈ : ` x ≈ ` x
  ξ≈ : L ≈ L' → M ≈ M' → L · M ≈ L' · M'
  ζ≈ : И (λ 𝕩 → conc f 𝕩 ≈ conc g 𝕩) → λ f ≈ λ g
```

We can naturally express α-equivalence of λ-terms using the И quantifier and manually prove the aforementioned swapping laws and the fact that every λ-term has finite support. However, these all admit a systematic datatype-generic construction and we are currently in the process of automating them.

The rest of the development remains identical to the mechanization presented in the PLFA textbook [14], particularly the 'Untyped' chapter. Meanwhile, the gnarly 'Substitution' appendix involving tedious index manipulations is now replaced by the usual nominal presentation of substitution, alongside a few general lemmas about equivariance and support:

```
_[_/_] : Term → Atom → Term → Term
(` x)     [ 𝕒 / N ] = if x == 𝕒 then N else ` x
(L · M)   [ 𝕒 / N ] = L [ 𝕒 / N ] · M [ 𝕒 / N ]
(λ f)     [ 𝕒 / N ] = λ z ⇒ conc f z [ 𝕒 / N ] where z = freshAtom (𝕒 ∷ supp f ++ supp N)
```

We still have a few remaining lemmas to prove to fully cover the PLFA chapter on untyped λ-calculus, but we do not see any inherent obstacles to completing the confluence proof. Once this is done, we plan to proceed to more complex cases — a good next step would be to see how a proof of *cut elimination* for first-order logic works out, since this involves name-abstraction on both terms and proof-trees.

**Related work** A nominal mechanization in Agda exists specific to the untyped $\lambda$-calculus which includes a proof of confluence similar to ours [4, 3]. Ours closely matches the non-mechanized formulation in [7], which the Haskell `nom` package [6] then implements. Another representation of nominal sets in Agda [1] is preliminary and we would hope that our approach is more ergonomic and more amenable to scaling up. We treat our Agda library as a complement to other nominal implementations (in FreshML [12], Isabelle/HOL [13], and Nuprl [11]) that is ergonomic, requires no changes to the base system, is easily accessible, and illustrates the practical compatibility of nominal techniques within a constructive type system.

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