Binder Problem and Reference Proposal (Revised)

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ABSTRACT

Binders don't work for functions that take reference arguments. The reason is that the bound argument value is stored as a reference. That reference is of type argument to the argument type (which is itself a reference). This note first discusses the problem and a few possible ways of addressing it. The suggested solution is to define ***T***&& to mean ***T***&. This solution is discussed in some detail and suggested modifications of the standards text are presented.

1 The Problem

Here is what appears to be an interesting example sent to me by Chuck Allison:

```
#include <algorithm>
#include <iostream>
#include <string>
#include <functional>
using namespace std;

struct Person
{
   string name;
   int year;
   int month;
   int day;

   Person() : name("") { year = month = day = 0; }

   Person(const string& nm, int y, int m, int d) : name(nm) { year = y; month = m; day = d; }
};

bool operator==(const Person& p1, const Person& p2)
{
   return p1.name==p2.name && p1.year==p2.year && p1.month==p2.month && p1.day==p2.day;
}

ostream& operator<<(ostream& os, const Person& p)
{
   os << '{' << p.name << ',' << p.month << '/' << p.day  << '/' << p.year << '}';
   return os;
}

bool byName(const Person& p, const string& s)        // note: arguments passed by reference
{
   return p.name == s;
}
```

```
int main()
{
    Person a[] = {
        Person("Albert", 1901,1,20);
        Person("Charles", 1897,3,11);
        Person("Horatio", 1835,12,6);
    };
    int n = sizeof a / sizeof a[0];
    Person* past = a + n;
    Person v("Charles", 1897,3,11);

    Person* p = find_if(a, past, bind2nd(ptr_fun(byName), "Charles")); // error: string&&
    if (p != past)
        cout << "found " << *p << " in position " << p - a << endl;
    else
        cout << "item not found\n";
}
```

This seems like a reasonable thing to do. However, it doesn't compile. The reason is that ***bind2nd*()** stores a reference to the argument it needs to bind (in a ***binder2nd***). In the case of ***byName***, that argument is a reference argument so that ***binder2nd***'s constructor tries to create a reference to a reference.

You can get the same compile time error with this simplified ***main*()**:

```
int main()
{
    bind2nd(ptr_fun(byName), "Chuck");          // error: cannot create const string&&
}
```

The definition of ***binder2nd*** (20.3.6.3, [lib.binder.2nd]) is:

```
template <class Operation>
class binder2nd : public unary_function<typename Operation::first_argument_type,
                                        typename Operation::result_type> {
protected:
    Operation op;
    typename Operation::second_argument_type value;

public:
    binder2nd(const Operation& x, const typename Operation::second_argument_type& y);
    typename Operation::result_type operator()
        (const typename Operation::first_argument_type& x) const;
};
```

The problem is ***binder2nd*()**'s argument of type ***Operation::second_argument_type&***. In the case of ***byName***, ***Operation::second_argument_type*** is ***const string&***. Had we managed to create a ***binder2nd***, we would have to face the same problem for operator() 's argument.

We cannot bind an argument of a function taking a reference argument!

2 What To Do

I see three obvious approaches to this problem:

[1] Tell users ''then, just don't do that.'' I don't think this is realistic. Arguments passed by reference – and in particular by ***const*** reference – are common and recommended. Often, a user has no control over the definition of such predicate functions and even less control over (or understanding of) the details of binder implementations. This problem must be solved – the questions are ''how?'', ''when?'', and ''who by?''

[2] Add more binders. Unfortunately, I don't see how we can do that without adding new binder names. To define another (overloaded) version of ***bind2nd*()** to cope with reference arguments, we would somehow have to overload or specialize based on the difference between a reference and a non-reference. Adding new names would complicate a user interface that already causes eyes of many average-to-good programmers to glaze over.

[3] Have ***binder2nd*** store a copy of its bound argument. This would change semantics and would

introduce serious memory and run-time overhead in exactly the cases where we recommend using reference argument rather than pass-by-value.

I (clearly) don't find any of these alternatives attractive. Furthermore, the problem occurs in many other contexts where people write function objects. Thus, changes to the standard-library binders do not address the fundamental problem and would fail to address the larger problem. We must therefore consider a more general alternative:

[4] Define ***T***&& to mean ***T***&. This variant of the pointer-to-function rule (***f*** means &***f*** and ***pf***( ) means (****pf***)( )) seems to solve this problems in general. It is also similar to the rule that allows ***const T*** for a ***T*** that is already a ***const*** type.

3 Discussion and Proposal

I presented the problem and my proposed solution at the Dublin meeting. There, the library group agreed that it was best approached as a core language issue. The core group then discussed it, liked equating ***T***&& with ***T***& was the best solution and voted to ''let it soak for a while to see if anyone finds problems with it.'' Further thought and discussion on reflectors and elsewhere did not bring up new problems or new solutions.

The question was asked whether ''reference to reference'' should be allowed syntactically or only when it occur as the result of applying the declarator operator & to a type that is a reference. For example:

```
int x;
int&& r = x; // legal?
```

On principle, I prefer accepting a construct unless there is compelling reason not to. In this case, I do not see a compelling reason for a ban. However, I don't see any major advantage from accepting it either, and there is a trap: && is the logical-and operator rather than two & reference-declarator operators. Thus the example would have to be written using an extra space.

```
int x;
int&& r = x; // syntax error!
int& & r = x;       // legal?
```

By analogy, ***const*** cannot be (syntactically) repeated in a declaration:

```
const const int a;    // error
typedef const int CI;
const CI;         // ok
```

Consequently, the Dublin session of the core group recommended that & should not be allowed to be repeated in a declaration, and that's what I'm proposing.

The construct can arise in two ways, through template parameters:

```
template<class T> class X { f(const T&); /* ... */ };
X<int&> x;
```

and through typedefs:

```
int i;
typedef int& RI;
RI r1 = i;
RI& r = i;
```

To handle the typedef case, add to the end of 7.1.3 ''The typedef specifier'' [dcl.typedef]:

''If a typdef ***TD*** names a reference type, then ***TD***& names that same reference type. [Example:

```
int i;
typedef int& RI;
RI r1 = i;
RI& r = i; // r has the type int&
```

-end example].''

To handle the template argument case, add to the end of 14.3.1 ''Template type arguments'' [temp.arg.type]:

''If a *template-argument* for a *template-parameter* ***T*** names a reference type, then ***T***& names that same

reference type. [Example:

```
template<class T> class X { f(const T&); /* ... */ };
X<int&> x;        // X<int&>::f has the argument type const int&
```

-end example].''

Note that I'm not proposing a change to 14.4 ''Type Equivalance'' [temp.type]. This implies that ***X<int&>*** and ***X<int>*** are different types independently of the definition of the template ***X***. It also follows that ***X<T&>*** and ***X<T>*** are the same type when ***T*** names a reference type. Because the ''ref ref rule'' is expressed in terms of what a name names, the rules for template instantiation, template specialization, etc. are unaffected by the new rule.

4 Acknowledgements

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