We propose to fix a hole intentionally left in `std::optional` —
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 `U` cannot be bound to a `T&`.

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### Changes Since Last Version

- Changes since R1
  - Design points called out

#### 1 Comparison table

1.1 Using a raw pointer result for an element search function

This is the convention the C++ core guidelines suggest, to use a raw pointer for representing optional non-owning references. However, there is a user-required check against `nullptr`, no type safety meaning no safety against mis-interpreting such a raw pointer, for example by using pointer arithmetic on it.

```c++
Cat* cat = find_cat("Fido");  // std::optional<Cat&> cat = find_cat("Fido");
if (cat!=nullptr) { return doit(*cat); } return cat.and_then(doit);
```
1.2 returning result of an element search function via a (smart) pointer

The disadvantage here is that std::experimental::observer_ptr<T> is both non-standard and not well named, therefore this example uses shared_ptr that would have the advantage of avoiding dangling through potential lifetime extension. However, on the downside is still the explicit checks against the nullptr on the client side, failing so risks undefined behavior.

```cpp
std::shared_ptr<Cat> cat = find_cat("Fido");
if (cat != nullptr) { /* ... */
    cat.and_then([](Cat& thecat){ /* ... */});
}
```

1.3 returning result of an element search function via an iterator

This might be the obvious choice, for example, for associative containers, especially since their iterator stability guarantees. However, returning such an iterator will leak the underlying container type as well necessarily requires one to know the sentinel of the container to check for the not-found case.

```cpp
std::map<std::string, Cat>::iterator cat = find_cat("Fido");
if (cat != theunderlyingmap.end()) { /* ... */
    cat.and_then([](Cat& thecat){ /* ... */});
}
```

1.4 Using an optional<T*> as a substitute for optional<T&>

This approach adds another level of indirection and requires two checks to take a definite action.

```cpp
//Mutable optional
std::optional<Cat*> c = find_cat("Fido");
if (c) {
    if (*c) {
        *c.value() = Cat("Fynn", color::orange);
    }
}
```

2 Motivation

Other than the standard library’s implementation of optional, optionals holding references are common. 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_ shows conclusively that rebind 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_.

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 an 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 an non-existing element by a nullptr de-reference. 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.

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, because 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 we can’t guarantee from std::tuple<Args...> (product type) that std::variant<Args...> (sum type) 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.

Thus, we expect future papers to propose std::expected<T&, E> and std::variant with the ability to hold references. The latter can be used as an iteration type over std::tuple elements.

3 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 [Downey_smd_optionalOptionalOptional_T] and [rawgithubus58:online]. 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.

3.1 Relational Operations

The definitions of the relational operators are the same as for the base template. Interoperable comparisons between T and optional<T&> work as expected. This is not true for the boost optional<T&>.

3.2 make_optional

Because of existing code, make_optional<T&> must return optional<T> rather than optional<T&>. Returning optional<T&> is consistent and defensible, and a few optional implementations in production make this choice. It is, however, quite easy to construct a make Optional expression that deduces a different category causing possibly dangerous changes to code.

3.3 Trivial construction

Construction of optional<T&> should be trivial, because it is straightforward to implement, and optional<T> is trivial. Boost is not.

3.4 Value Category Affects value()

For several implementations there are distinct overloads for functions depending on value category, with the same implementation. However, this makes it very easy to accidentally steal from the underlying referred to object. Value category should be shallow. Thanks to many people for pointing this out. If “Deducing this” had been used, the problem would have been much more subtle in code review.

3.5 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.
3.6 Conditional Explicit
As in the base template, `explicit` is made conditional on the type used to construct the optional. `explicit(!std::is_convertible_v<U, T>)`. This is not present in `boost::optional`, leading to differences in construction between braced initialization and `=` that can be surprising.

3.7 value_or
Have `value_or` return a `T&`. Check that the supplied value can be bound to a `T&`.

3.8 Compiler Explorer Playground
See [https://godbolt.org/z/n500oK58W](https://godbolt.org/z/n500oK58W) for a playground with relevant Google Test functions and various optional implementations made available for cross reference.

4 Proposal
Add a reference specialization for the `std::optional` template.

5 Wording

```
4.1 Class template `optional`
namespace std {
    template <class T>
    class optional<T&> {
        public:
            using value_type = T&;

            // 4.1.2 constructors
            constexpr optional() noexcept;
            constexpr optional(nullopt_t) noexcept;
            constexpr optional(const optional&) = default;
            constexpr optional(optional&&) noexcept = default;
            template<class U>
            constexpr explicit(see below) optional(U&&);
            template<class U>
            constexpr explicit(see below) optional(const optional<U>&);

            // 4.1.3 destructor
            constexpr ~optional();

            // 4.1.4 assignment
            constexpr optional& operator=(nullopt_t) noexcept;
            constexpr optional& operator=(const optional&) noexcept = default;
            constexpr optional& operator=(optional&&) noexcept = default;
            template<class U = T> constexpr optional& operator=(U&&);
            template<class U> constexpr optional& operator=(const optional<U>&);
            template<class U> constexpr T& emplace(U&&);

            // 4.1.5 swap
            constexpr void swap(optional&) noexcept;

            // 4.1.6 observers
            constexpr T* operator->() const noexcept;
            constexpr T& operator*() const noexcept;
            constexpr explicit operator bool() const noexcept;
            constexpr bool has_value() const noexcept;
            constexpr const T& value() const; // freestanding-deleted
            template<class U> constexpr T value_or(U&&) const;
```
1.7 Monadic operations

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

1.8 Modifiers

```cpp
constexpr void reset() noexcept;
```

```cpp
private:
  T *val; // exposition only
};
```

Any instance of optional<T&> at any given time either refers to a value or does not refer to a value. When an instance of optional<T&> refers to a value, it means that an object of type T, referred to as the optional object's referred to value, is pointed to from the storage of the optional object. When an object of type optional<T&> is contextually converted to bool, the conversion returns true if the object refers to a value; otherwise the conversion returns false.

When an optional<T&> object refers to a value, member val points to the referred to object.

### Constructors

#### [optional.ctor]

```cpp
constexpr optional() noexcept;
constexpr optional(nullopt_t) noexcept;
```

**Postconditions:** *this does not refer to a value.

**Remarks:** For every object type T these constructors are constexpr constructors (??).

```cpp
constexpr optional(const optional& rhs) noexcept = default;
```

**Effects:** If rhs refers to a value, direct-non-list-initializes the referred to value with rhs.val.

**Postconditions:** rhs.has_value() == this->has_value().

**Throws:** Nothing

**Remarks:** This constructor is trivial.

```cpp
constexpr optional(optional&& rhs) noexcept = default;
```

**Effects:** If rhs refers to a value, direct-non-list-initializes the referred to value with rhs.val. rhs.has_value() is unchanged.

**Postconditions:** rhs.has_value() == this->has_value().

**Remarks:** This constructor is trivial.

```cpp
template<class U = T> constexpr explicit(see below) optional(U&& v);
```

**Constraints:**

(10.1) is_same_v<remove_cvref_t<U>, optional> is false, and
(10.2) if T is cv bool, remove_cvref_t<U> is not a specialization of optional.

**Mandates:**

(11.1) is_constructible_v<add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U> is true
(11.2) is_lvalue_reference<U>::value is true

**Effects:** Direct-non-list-initializes the referred to value with addressof(v).

**Postconditions:** *this refers to a value.
template<class U> constexpr explicit(optional(const optional<U>& rhs));

Constraints:
— is_same_v<remove_cvref_t<U>, optional> is false.
Effects: If rhs refers to a value, direct-non-list-initializes the referred to value with addressof(rhs.value()).
Postconditions: rhs.has_value() == this->has_value().
Remarks: The expression inside explicit is equivalent to:
!is_convertible_v<U, T>

1.3 Destructor [optional.dtor]
constexpr ~optional() = default;
Remarks: This destructor is trivial.

1.4 Assignment [optional.assign]
optional& operator=(nullopt_t) noexcept;
Postconditions: *this does not refer to a value.
Returns: *this.

optional& operator=(optional<U>& rhs) noexcept = default;
Postconditions: rhs.has_value() == this->has_value.
Returns: *this.

optional& operator=(optional&& rhs) noexcept = default;
Postconditions: rhs.has_value() == this->has_value().
Returns: *this.

template<class U = T> constexpr optional<T>& operator=(U&& v);
Constraints:
— is_same_v<remove_cvref_t<U>, optional> is false
— conjunction_v<is_scalar<T>, is_same<T, decay_t<U>>> is false
Mandates:
— is_constructible_v<add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U> is true
— is_lvalue_reference<U>::value is true
Effects: Assigns the referred to value with addressof(v).
Postconditions: *this refers to a value.

template<class U> constexpr optional<T>& operator=(const optional<U>& rhs);
Mandates:
— is_constructible_v<add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U> is true
— is_lvalue_reference<U>::value is true
Postconditions: rhs.has_value() == this->has_value().
Returns: *this.
template <class U = T> optional& emplace(U&& u) noexcept;

**Constraints:**

- \((13.1)\) \(\text{is\_same\_v<remove\_cvref\_t<U>,\; optional>\; is\; false,\; and}\)
- \((13.2)\) \(\text{if } T \text{ is cv bool, remove\_cvref\_t<U> is not a specialization of optional.}\)

**Effects:** Assigns \(*\text{this}\) forward\(<U>(u)\)

**Postconditions:** \(*\text{this}\) refers to a value.

### 1.5 Swap

```cpp
constexpr void swap(optional& rhs) noexcept;
```

**Effects:** \(*\text{this}\) and \(*\text{rhs}\) will refer to each others initial referred to objects.

### 1.6 Observers

```cpp
constexpr T* operator->() const noexcept;
```

**Returns:** \(\text{val.}\)

**Remarks:** These functions are constexpr functions.

```cpp
constexpr T& operator*() const noexcept;
```

**Returns:** \(*\text{val.}\)

**Remarks:** These functions are constexpr functions.

```cpp
constexpr explicit operator bool() const noexcept;
```

**Returns:** \(true\) if and only if \(*\text{this}\) refers to a value.

**Remarks:** This function is a constexpr function.

```cpp
constexpr bool has_value() const noexcept;
```

**Returns:** \(true\) if and only if \(*\text{this}\) refers to a value.

**Remarks:** This function is a constexpr function.

```cpp
constexpr T& value() const;
```

**Effects:** Equivalent to:

```cpp
if (has\_value())
    return *value_
    throw bad\_optional\_access();
```

**Mandates:** \(\text{is\_constructible\_v<add\_lvalue\_reference\_t<T>,\; decltype(v)>\; is\; true.}\)

**Effects:** Equivalent to:

```cpp
return has\_value() ? value() : forward\(<U>(u);
```

### 1.7 Monadic operations

```cpp
template<class F> constexpr auto and_then(F&& f) const;
```
Let \( U \) be \( \text{invoke\_result\_t}\langle F, T\&\rangle \).

**Mandates:** \( \text{remove\_cv\_t}\langle U \rangle \) is a specialization of \( \text{optional} \).

**Effects:** Equivalent to:

\[
\text{return has\_value() ? invoke(\text{forward}\langle F\rangle(f), \text{value()}) : result(\text{nullopt});}
\]

\[
\text{template}\langle\text{class F}\rangle \text{constexpr auto transform}(F&& f) \text{ const;}
\]

Let \( U \) be \( \text{remove\_cv\_t}\langle\text{invoke\_result\_t}\langle F, T\&\rangle\rangle \).

**Returns:** If \(*\text{this}\) refers to a value, an \( \text{optional}\langle U \rangle \) object whose referred to value is the result of \( \text{invoke}(\text{forward}\langle F\rangle(f), \text{*val}); \) otherwise, \( \text{optional}\langle U \rangle() \).

\[
\text{template}\langle\text{class F}\rangle \text{constexpr optional or\_else}(F&& f) \text{ const;}
\]

**Mandates:** \( \text{is\_same\_v}\langle\text{remove\_cv\_t}\langle\text{invoke\_result\_t}\langle F\rangle\rangle, \text{optional}\rangle \) is true.

**Effects:** Equivalent to:

\[
\text{if (has\_value())}
\text{return value()}
\text{else}
\text{return forward\langle F\rangle(f());}
\]

6.1.8 Modifiers

\[
\text{constexpr void reset()} \text{ noexcept;}
\]

**Postconditions:** \(*\text{this}\) does not refer to a value.

6 Impact on the standard

A pure library extension, affecting no other parts of the library or language.

The proposed changes are relative to the current working draft [N4910].

Document history

– Changes since R1
  – Design points called out
– Changes since R0
  – Wording Updates

References


namespace detail {

template <class T>
struct is_optional_impl : std::false_type {};

template <class T>
struct is_optional_impl<optional<T>> : std::true_type {};

template <class T>
using is_optional = is_optional_impl<std::decay_t<T>>;
}

// namespace detail

/****************/
/* optional<T&> */
/****************/

template <class T>
class optional<T&> {
	public:
		using value_type = T&;

PRIVATE:
	T* value_; // exposition only

PUBLIC:
	// Sec3[optional.ctor]{Constructors}
	onconstexpr optional() noexcept : value_(nullptr) {};
	onconstexpr optional(nullopt_t) noexcept : value_(nullptr) {};
	onconstexpr optional(const optional& rhs) noexcept = default;
	onconstexpr optional(optional&& rhs) noexcept = default;

	template <class U = T>
	requires(!detail::is_optional<std::decay_t<U>>::value)
	onconstexpr explicit(!std::is_convertible_v<U, T>) optional(U&& u) noexcept
	: value_(std::addressof(u)) {
		static assert(
			std::is_constructible_v<std::add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U>,
			"Must be able to bind U to T&");
		static assert(
			std::is_lvalue_reference<U>::value,
			"U must be an lvalue");
	}

	template <class U>
	constexpr explicit(!std::is_convertible_v<U, T>)
	optional(const optional<U>&& rhs) noexcept
	: optional(*rhs) {};

	// Sec3[optional.dtor]{Destructor}
	onconstexpr ~optional() = default;

	// Sec3[optional.assign]{Assignment}
};
constexpr optional& operator=(nullopt_t) noexcept {
    value_ = nullptr;
    return *this;
}

constexpr optional& operator=(const optional& rhs) noexcept = default;
constexpr optional& operator=(optional&& rhs) noexcept = default;

template <class U = T>
    requires(!detail::is_optional<std::decay_t<U>>::value)
constexpr optional& operator=(U&& u) {
    static_assert(
        std::is_constructible_v<std::add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U>,
        "Must be able to bind U to T&");
    static_assert(std::is_lvalue_reference<U>::value,
        "U must be an lvalue");
    value_ = std::addressof(u);
    return *this;
}

template <class U>
constexpr optional& operator=(const optional<U>& rhs) noexcept {
    static_assert(
        std::is_constructible_v<std::add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, U>,
        "Must be able to bind U to T&");
    value_ = std::addressof(rhs.value());
    return *this;
}

template <class U>
    requires(!detail::is_optional<std::decay_t<U>>::value)
constexpr optional& emplace(U&& u) noexcept {
    return *this = std::forward<U>(u);
}

constexpr void swap(optional& rhs) noexcept {
    std::swap(value_, rhs.value_);
}

constexpr T* operator->() const noexcept { return value_; }

constexpr Tk operator*() const noexcept { return *value_; }

constexpr explicit operator bool() const noexcept {
    return value_ != nullptr;
}

constexpr Tk has_value() const noexcept { return value_ != nullptr; }

constexpr Tk value() const {
    if (has_value())
        return *value_;
    throw bad_optional_access();
}

constexpr void swap(optional& rhs) noexcept {
    std::swap(value_, rhs.value_);
}

constexpr Tk operator*() const noexcept { return *value_; }

constexpr Tk has_value() const noexcept { return value_ != nullptr; }

constexpr Tk value() const {
    if (has_value())
        return *value_;
    throw bad_optional_access();
}
constexpr T& value_or(U&& u) const {
    static_assert(std::is_constructible_v<std::add_lvalue_reference_t<T>, decltype(u)>,
        "Must be able to bind u to T&");
    return has_value() ? *value_ : std::forward<U>(u);
}

// \rSec3[optional.monadic]{Monadic operations}

template <class F>
constexpr auto and_then(F&& f) const {
    using U = std::invoke_result_t<F, T&>
    static_assert(detail::is_optional<U>::value,
        "F must return an optional");
    return (has_value()) ? std::invoke(std::forward<F>(f), *value_) : std::remove_cvref_t<U>();
}

template <class F>
constexpr auto transform(F&& f) const {
    using U = std::invoke_result_t<F, T&>
    return (has_value())
        ? optional<U>{std::invoke(std::forward<F>(f), *value_)}
        : optional<U>{};
}

template <class F>
constexpr auto or_else(F&& f) const {
    using U = std::invoke_result_t<F>
    static_assert(std::is_same_v<std::remove_cvref_t<U>, optional>);
    return has_value() ? *value_ : std::forward<F>(f)();
}

constexpr void reset() noexcept { value_ = nullptr; }