Immutability and Referential Transparency

Topics

- Mutation is unnecessary.
- Immutability offers referential transparency.
- Mutation complicates aliasing.
- Broader design considerations

Is immutability an obstacle or a tool?

- Programming experience in 251 and previously
- Readings about language implementation
- Efficiency in space and time
- Reliability
- Maintainability
- Ease of making/avoiding mistakes
- Clarity
- ...

Mutation is unnecessary.

Patterns for accumulating results without mutation:

- Build recursively
- Create fresh copy with changes
- Explicitly thread state through (e.g., fold):
  - Function does one step, from arguments to result.
  - HOF passes result on to the next step.
Immutability offers referential transparency

```
(define (sort-pair p)
  (if (< (car p) (cdr p))
    p
    (cons (cdr p) (car p))))

(define (sort-pair p)
  (if (< (car p) (cdr p))
    (cons (car p) (cdr p))
    (cons (cdr p) (car p))))
```

Cons cells are immutable.
Cannot tell if you copy or alias.

---

Consider mutation

```
(define x (mcons 3 4))
(define y (sort-mpair x))

; mutate car of x to hold 5
(set-mcdr! x 5)

(define z (mcdr y))
```

What is z?

---

Java security nightmare

```java
class ProtectedResource {
    private Resource theResource = ...;
    private String[] allowedUsers = ...;
    public String[] getAllowedUsers() {
        return allowedUsers;
    }
    public String currentUser() { ... }
    public void useTheResource() {
        for (int i = 0; i < allowedUsers.length; i++) {
            if (currentUser().equals(allowedUsers[i])) {
                // access allowed: use it
                return;
            }
        }
        throw new IllegalAccessException();
    }
}
```
Mutant users!

The problem:
```java
p.getAllowedUsers()[0] = p.currentUser();
p.useTheResource();
```

The fix:
```java
public String[] getAllowedUsers() {
  ... return a copy of allowedUsers ...
}
```

Could this happen without mutability?

A biasing on aliasing

**Immutability**
- Aliasing does not affect correctness, just performance.
- Other code cannot break your code, regardless of aliasing.
- Changing your aliasing cannot break other code.
- Document what, not how.
- Safe by default, optimize for performance.

**Mutability**
- Aliasing does affect both correctness and performance.
- Other code can break your code, depending on your aliasing.
- Changing your aliasing can break other code.
- Document what and how.
- Unsafe by default, optimize for performance and safety.

A broader PL design theme

Design choices matter. Less can be more (reliable).

Immutability + recursion (vs. mutability + loops) are central:
- Limiting how programs can be expressed
- Making elements more transparent/explicit

This style of design choice often supports:
- Simple reasoning
- Strong default guarantees
- Automated optimization opportunities

It does not mean limiting what computable functions can be implemented, just limiting how.