

Continuations in Scheme

Overview

- Control operators
- Concept of a [continuation](#) in a functional programming language
- Scheme's [call/cc](#)

Control operators

- Control operators manipulate the order of program steps
- Examples: [goto](#), [if](#), [loops](#), [return](#), [break](#), [exit](#)
- A pure functional programming language typically only has one of these: if
 - Well, scheme does have [do](#)
- Users can define many of their own control operators with macros (e.g., via define-syntax)
- What about return?

Control in Scheme

- Why doesn't Scheme have a return function?
- Maybe we don't need it to indicate the normal function return spots

```
(define (find-prime1 n)
  ;; returns the first prime  $\geq n$ 
  (if (prime? n) n (find-prime1 (add1 n))))
```

- But how about places where we want to “break out” of a computation

```
(define (find-prime2 n)
  ;; returns first prime between n and  $n^{**}2$ 
  (for-each
   (lambda (x) (and (prime? x) (return x)))
   (integers n (* n n))))
```

Catch and Throw in Lisp

- Lisp introduced (in the 70's) *catch and throw* to give a non-local return capability
- It was a very useful generalization of return
- (throw <expr>) causes a return from the nearest matching (catch <x>) found on stack
(defun foo-outer () (catch (foo-inner)))
(defun foo-inner () ... (if x (throw t)) ...)
- Both take an optional tag argument; (throw 'foo) can be caught by (catch 'foo) or (catch)

Scheme's functional approach

- Scheme provides some primitive built-ins that can create these and other control functions
- [call-with-current-continuation](#) is the main one
 - typically also bound to [call/cc](#)
- call/cc provides a way to escape out of computation to someplace higher on the stack
- It's used to create other powerful control mechanisms, like *co-routines* and *backtracking*
- call/cc does this in a decidedly functional way

Continuation

- A continuation represents the “future” of a computation at certain moment
- Consider the Scheme expression
$$(* (f1 \text{ exp1}) (f2 \textbf{(f3 4)} (f5 \text{ exp2})))$$
- The continuation of **(f3 4)** in that expression is the function
$$(\text{lambda } (X) (* (f1 \text{ exp1}) (f2 X (f5 \text{ exp2}))))$$
- The **continuation c** of an expression **e** is a function that awaits the value of **e** and proceeds with the computation

Call/cc

- call/cc takes a unary function f as its only argument
- When called, it reifies the current continuation as an object and applies f to it

example

```
> (for-each (lambda (x) (+ x x)) '(1 2 3))
```

```
> (for-each (lambda (x) (printf "~s " x)) '(1 2 3))
```

```
> 1 2 3 >
```

```
> (call/cc
```

```
  (lambda (exit)
```

```
    (for-each
```

```
      (lambda (x) (if (negative? x) (exit x) #f))
```

```
      '(54 0 37 -3 245 19)) #t))
```

```
-3
```

Implementing return

```
(define (search pred? lst)
  ; returns first item in LST satisfying pred? or #f
  (call/cc
    (lambda (return)
      (for-each
        (lambda (item) (if (pred? item) (return item) #f))
        lst)
      #f)))
```

The return can be non-local

```
(define (treat item like-it)
```

```
  ; Call like-it with a custom argument when we like item
```

```
  (if (good-item? item) (like-it 'fnord) #f))
```

```
(define good-item? odd?)
```

```
(define (search2 treat lst)
```

```
  ; Call treat with every item in lst and a procedure to call
```

```
  ; when treat likes this item.
```

```
  (call/cc
```

```
    (lambda (return) (for-each (lambda (item) (treat item return))
```

```
                               lst)
```

```
    #f)))
```

We can re-call continuations

```
> (define return #f)
```

```
> (+ 1
```

```
  (call/cc (lambda (cont) (set! return cont) 2))
```

```
  3)
```

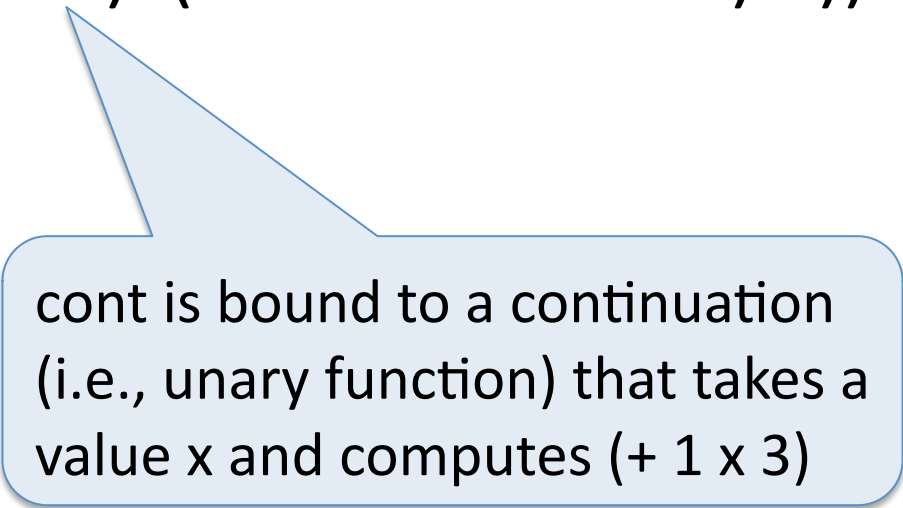
```
6
```

```
> return
```

```
#<continuation>
```

```
> (return 100)
```

```
104
```



cont is bound to a continuation (i.e., unary function) that takes a value x and computes (+ 1 x 3)

re-call continuations 2

```
> (define a 1) (define b 2) (define c 3) (define return
  #f)
> (define (add-abc)
  (+ a (call/cc (lambda (cont) (set! return cont) b)) c))
> (add-abc)
6
> return
#<continuation>
> (return 100)
104
```

```
> (set! a 1000)
> (return 100)
104
(set! c 999)
> (return 100)
1100
```

Coroutines

- Coroutines are procedures that persist after they exit and then can be re-entered
- They maintain their state in between calls
- They provide an alternative mechanism to threads for interleaving two processes
- You can implement coroutines in Scheme with continuations

Hefty and Superfluous

```
(define (hefty other)
  (let loop ((n 5))
    (printf "Hefty: ~s\n" n)
    (set! do-other (call/cc other))
    (printf "Hefty (b)\n")
    (set! do-other (call/cc other))
    (printf "Hefty (c)\n")
    (set! do-other (call/cc other))
    (if (> n 0) (loop (- n 1)) #f)))
```

```
(define clock-positions
  ("Straight up." "Quarter after."
   "Half past." "Quarter til.))

(define (superfluous other)
  (let loop ()
    (for-each
     (lambda (graphic)
       (printf "~s\n" graphic)
       (set! other (call/cc other))))
     clock-positions
    (loop)))
```

Hefty and Superfluous

> (hefty superfluous)

Hefty: 5

"Straight up."

Hefty (b)

"Quarter after."

Hefty (c)

"Half past."

Hefty: 4

"Quarter til."

...

...

Hefty (c)

"Half past."

Hefty: 0

"Quarter til."

Hefty (b)

"Straight up."

Hefty (c)

"Quarter after."

#f

Summary

- Continuations are a both weird and hard to understand
- They're also expensive to implement and use
- Most languages choose to add those control features (e.g., return, catch throw) that programmers understand and want
- These are also added in Scheme via libraries
- But Scheme is mostly a PL for experimenting with PLs and new PL ideas and features