

# *The Abstraction Vs. Approximations Dilemma in Pointer Analysis*

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# Outline

- **Disclaimer:** This talk is
  - ▶ not about accomplishments but about opinions, and hopes
  - ▶ an idealistic view of pointer analysis (the destination we wish to reach)



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- **Outline:**
  - ▶ Our Meanderings
  - ▶ Some short trips
  - ▶ Conclusions



*Part 1*

*Our Meanderings*

## Pointer Analysis Musings

- A keynote address:

“The worst thing that has happened to Computer Science is C, because it brought pointers with it . . .”

- Frances Allen, IITK Workshop (2007)

- A couple of influential papers

- Which Pointer Analysis should I Use?

Michael Hind and Anthony Pioli. ISTAA 2000

- Pointer Analysis: Haven't we solved this problem yet ?

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- 2017 .. 



# The Mathematics of Pointer Analysis

In the most general situation

- Alias analysis is undecidable.  
Landi-Ryder [POPL 1991], Landi [LOPLAS 1992],  
Ramalingam [TOPLAS 1994]
- Flow insensitive alias analysis is NP-hard  
Horwitz [TOPLAS 1997]
- Points-to analysis is undecidable  
Chakravarty [POPL 2003]

*Adjust your expectations suitably to avoid disappointments!*





## So what should we expect?

To quote Hind [PASTE 2001]



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*Engineering of pointer analysis is much more dominant than its science*



## Pointer Analysis: Engineering or Science?

- Engineering view
  - ▶ Build quick **approximations**
  - ▶ The tyranny of (exclusive) OR  
Precision OR Efficiency?
- Science view
  - ▶ Build clean **abstractions**
  - ▶ Can we harness the Genius of AND?  
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- Science view
  - ▶ Build clean **abstractions**
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Precision AND Efficiency?
- Most common trend as evidenced by publications
  - ▶ Build acceptable approximations guided by empirical observations
  - ▶ The notion of acceptability is often constrained by beliefs rather than possibilities



# Abstraction Vs. Approximation in Static Analysis

- Static analysis needs to create abstract values that represent many concrete values
- Mapping concrete values to abstract values

- ▶ *Abstraction.*

Deciding which properties of the concrete values are essential

What

Ease of understanding, reasoning, modelling etc.

Why

- ▶ *Approximation.*

Deciding which properties of the concrete values cannot be represented accurately and should be summarized

What

Decidability, tractability, or efficiency and scalability

Why



# Abstraction Vs. Approximation in Static Analysis

- Abstractions
  - ▶ focus on precision and conciseness of modelling
  - ▶ tell us what we can ignore without being imprecise
- Approximations
  - ▶ focus on efficiency and scalability
  - ▶ tell us the imprecision that we have to tolerate





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- Approximations
  - ▶ focus on efficiency and scalability
  - ▶ tell us the imprecision that we have to tolerate
- *Build clean abstractions before surrendering to the approximations*



## The Basis of My Hope

- Common belief:
- The possibility that I dream of:
- The basis of my hope:



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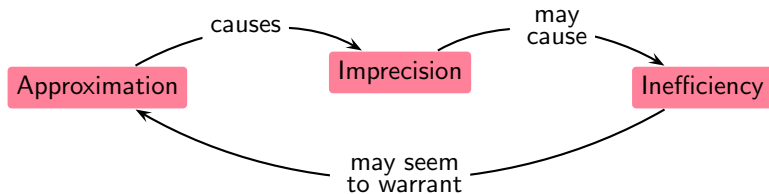
At any program point, the usable pointer information is much smaller than the total pointer information

Current methods perform many repeated and possibly avoidable computations



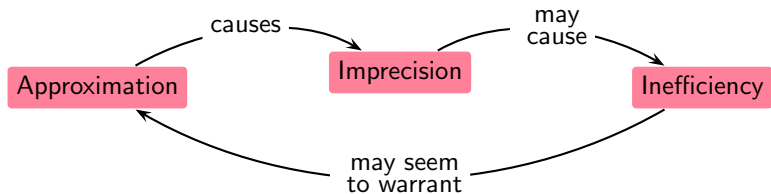
## Why Avoid Approximations?

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- Two examples of inefficiency cause by approximations
  - ▶ *k*-limited call strings may create “butterfly cycles” causing spurious fixed point computations [Hakjoo, 2010]
  - ▶ Imprecision in function pointer analysis overapproximates calls may create spurious recursion in call graphs



## Which Approximations Would I like to Avoid?

Approximation	Admits
Flow insensitivity	
Context insensitivity (or partial context sensitivity)	
Imprecision in call graphs	
Allocation site based heap abstraction	





## Which Approximations Would I like to Avoid?

Approximation	Admits
Flow insensitivity	Spurious intraprocedural paths
Context insensitivity (or partial context sensitivity)	Spurious interprocedural paths
Imprecision in call graphs	Spurious call sequences
Allocation site based heap abstraction	Spurious paths in memory graph



# The Classical Precision-Efficiency Dilemma

Abstraction	Role in precision	Cause of inefficiency
	Distinguishes between	Needs to consider
Flow sensitivity		
Context sensitivity		
Precise heap abstraction		
Precise call structure		



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## The Classical Precision-Efficiency Dilemma

Abstraction	Role in precision	Cause of inefficiency
	Distinguishes between	Needs to consider
Flow sensitivity	Information at different program points	A large number of program points
Context sensitivity	Information in different contexts	Exponentially large number of contexts
Precise heap abstraction	Different heap locations	Unbounded number of heap locations
Precise call structure	Indirect calls made to different callees from the same program point	Precise points-to information



## Flow Insensitivity in Data Flow Analysis

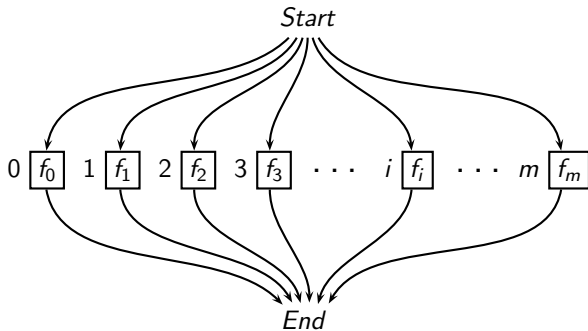
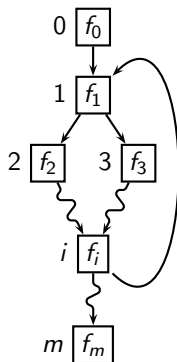
- Assumption: Statements can be executed in any order.
- Instead of computing point-specific data flow information, summary data flow information is computed.

The summary information is required to be a safe approximation of point-specific information for each point.

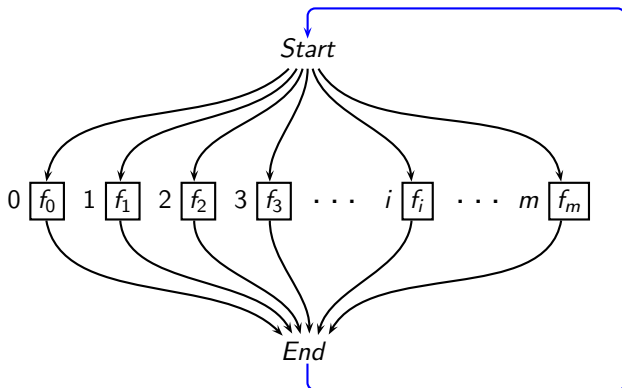
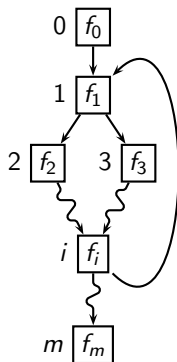
- No data flow information is killed  
If a statement kills data flow information, there is an alternate path that excludes the statement.



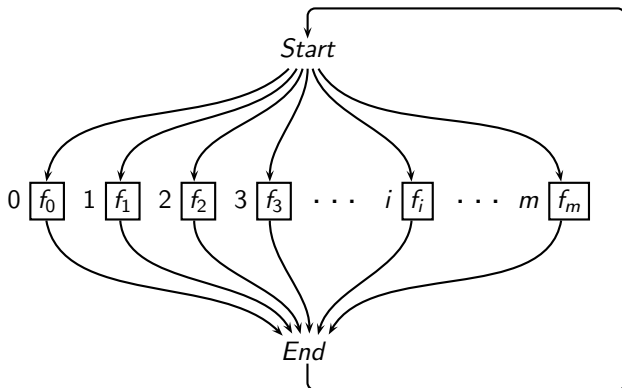
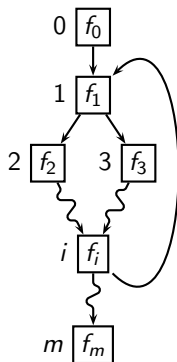
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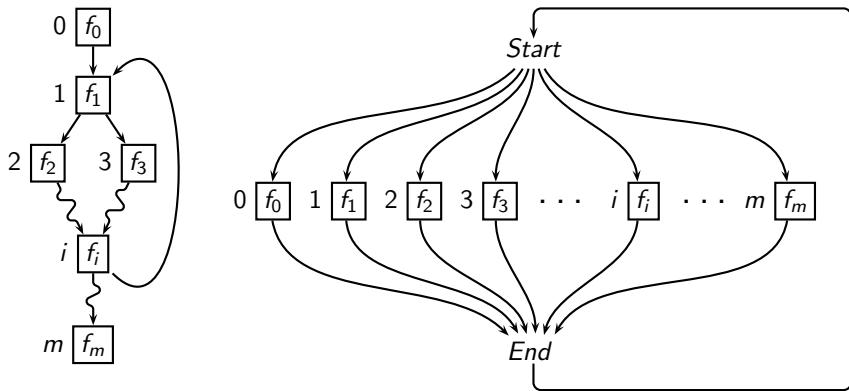


*Allows arbitrary compositions of flow functions in any order  
⇒ Flow insensitivity*





## Flow Insensitivity in Data Flow Analysis



*In practice, dependent constraints are collected in a global repository in one pass and then are solved independently*



## If I am Allowed to Nitpick . . .

- Context sensitivity should involve all of the following
  - [A] Full context sensitivity regardless of the call depth even in recursion
  - [B] Ability to store data flow information parameterized by contexts at each program point
  - [C] Flow sensitivity at the intraprocedural level (otherwise distinct calls to the same procedure within a procedure cannot be distinguished)



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- In particular
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  - ▶ Object sensitivity violates [C]

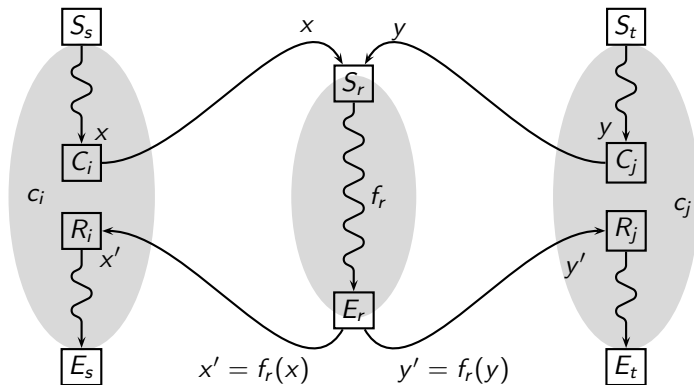


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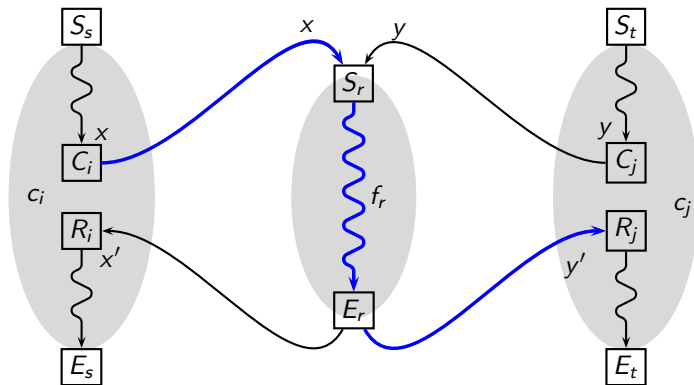
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- Object sensitivity can be completely modelled by calling context sensitivity
  - ▶ by a flow sensitive propagation of values representing objects, and
  - ▶ identifying a procedure by an (object, procedure) pair, and
  - ▶ identifying a context by a call site and the pairs defined as above



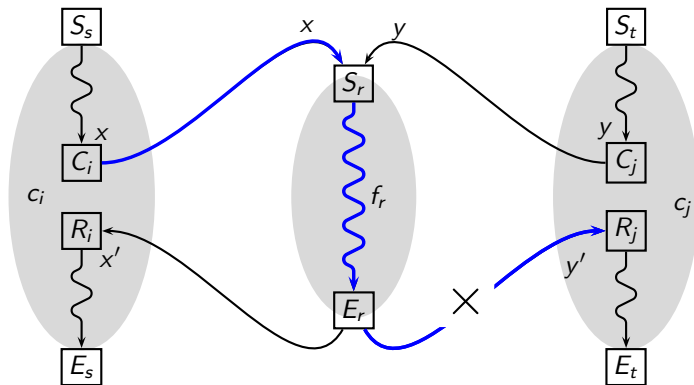
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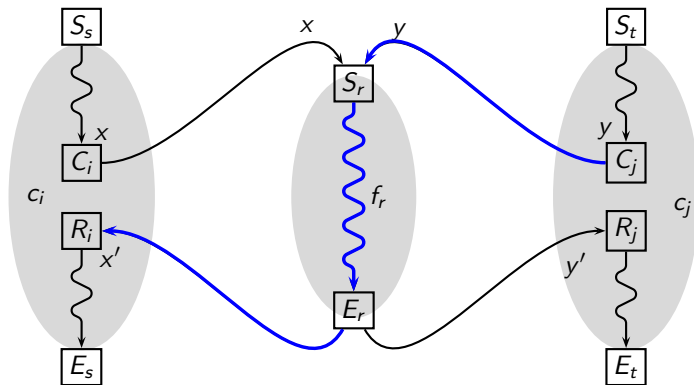
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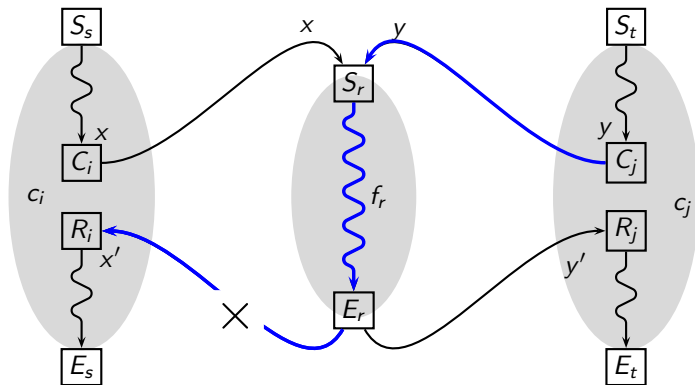


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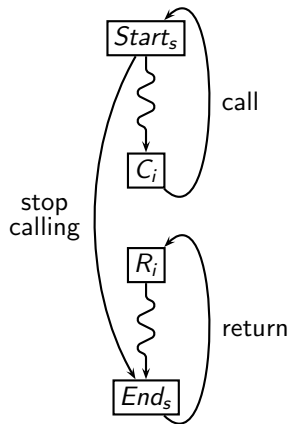




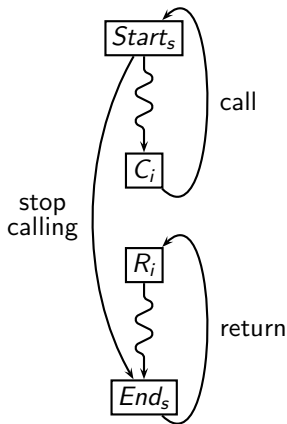
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## Context Sensitivity in the Presence of Recursion



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$call^n \cdot stop \cdot return^n$

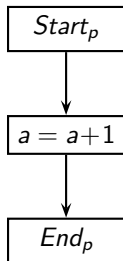
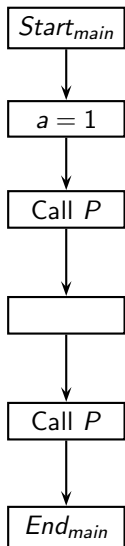
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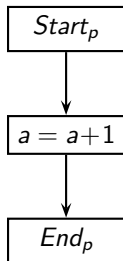
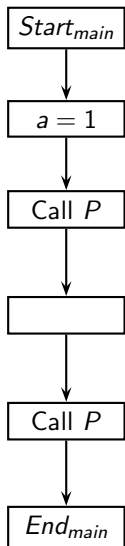
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# Context Insensitivity = Imprecision + Potential Inefficiency



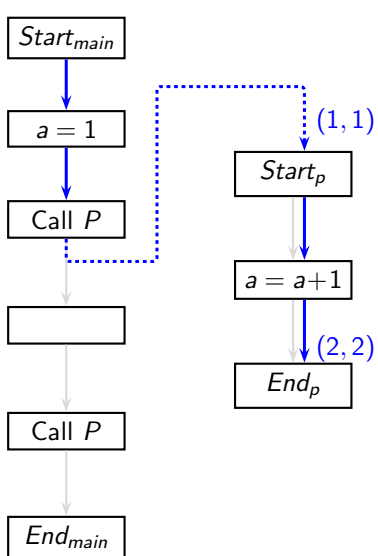
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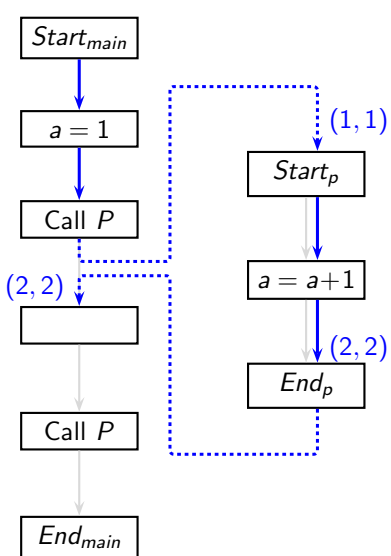
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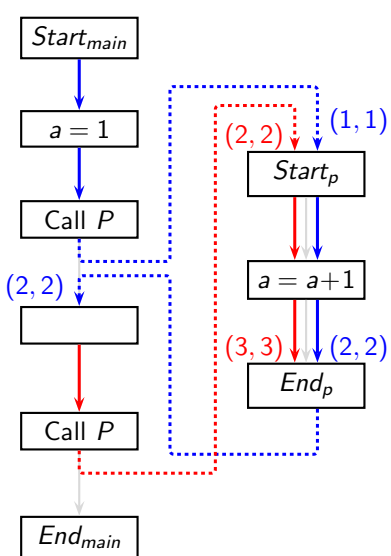
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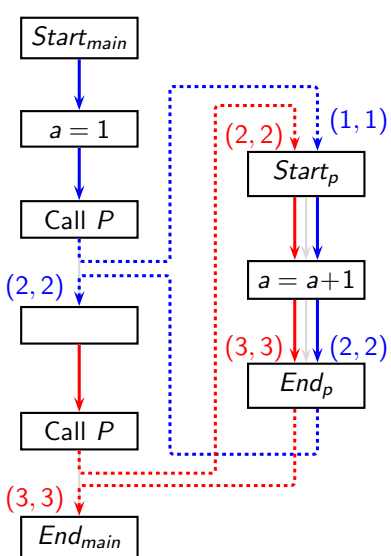


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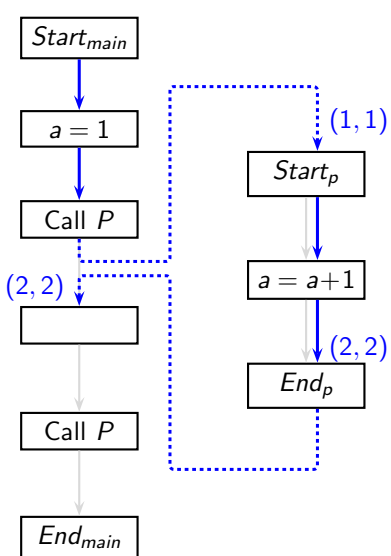
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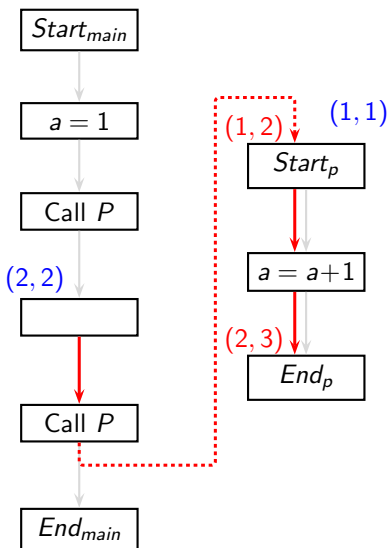
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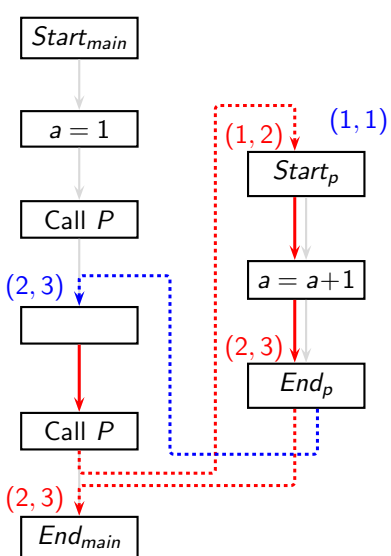
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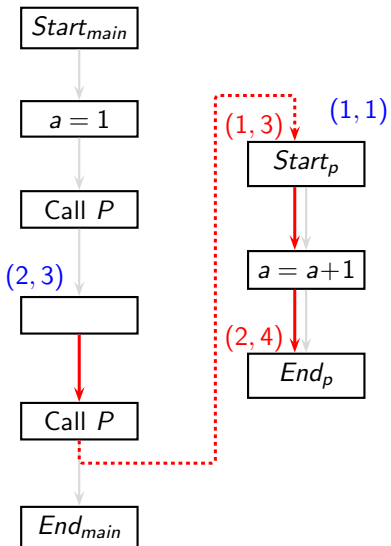
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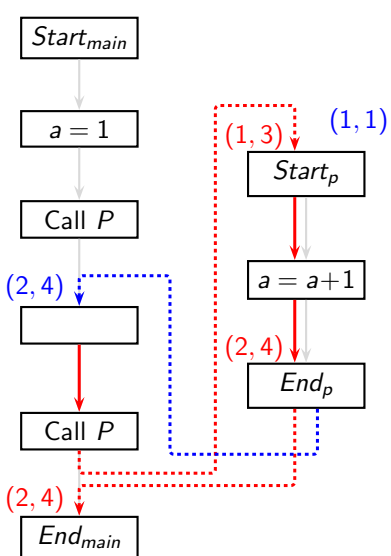
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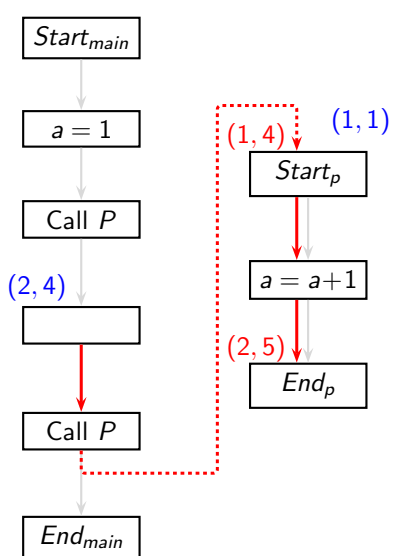
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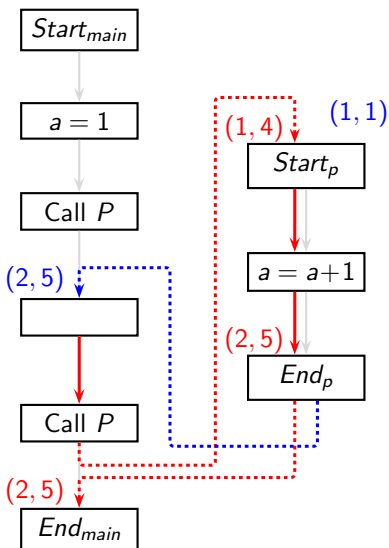
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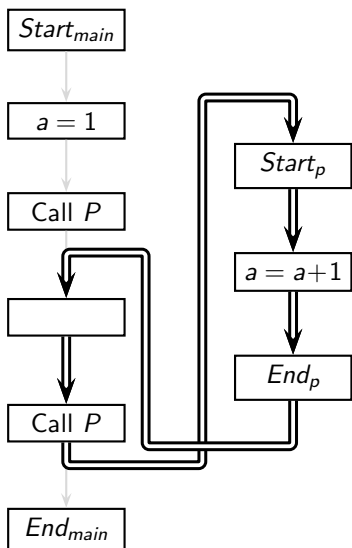


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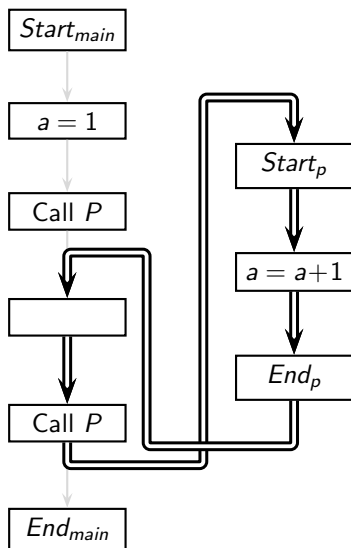
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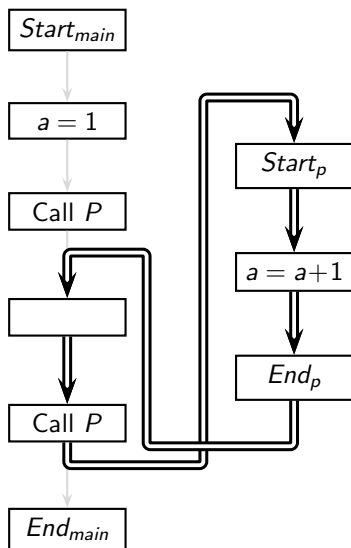
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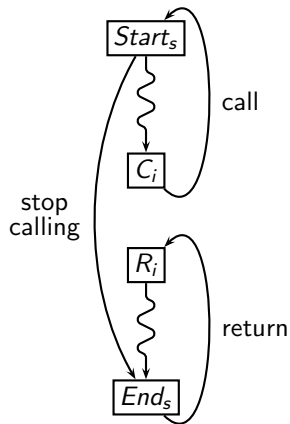
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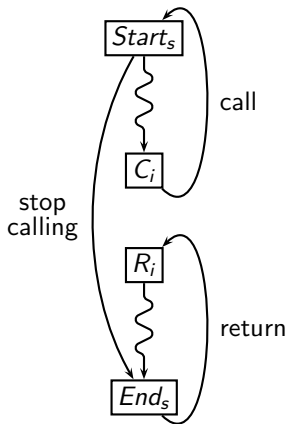
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- *Spurious interprocedural loops*
- *Spurious fixed point computations*



# Context Sensitivity in the Presence of Recursion



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$$\text{call}^n \cdot \text{stop} \cdot \text{return}^n$$

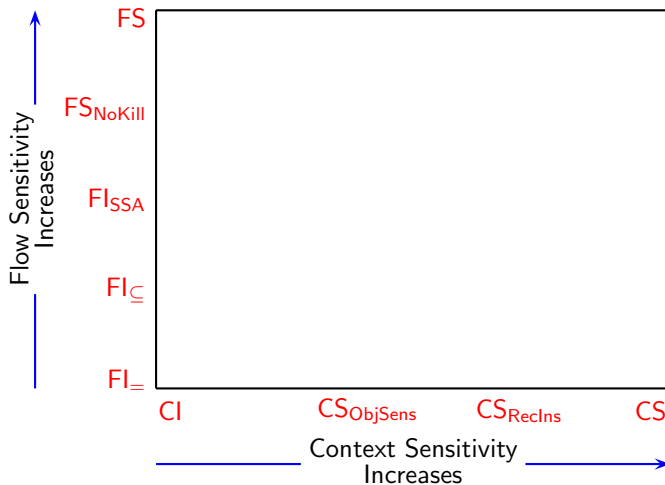
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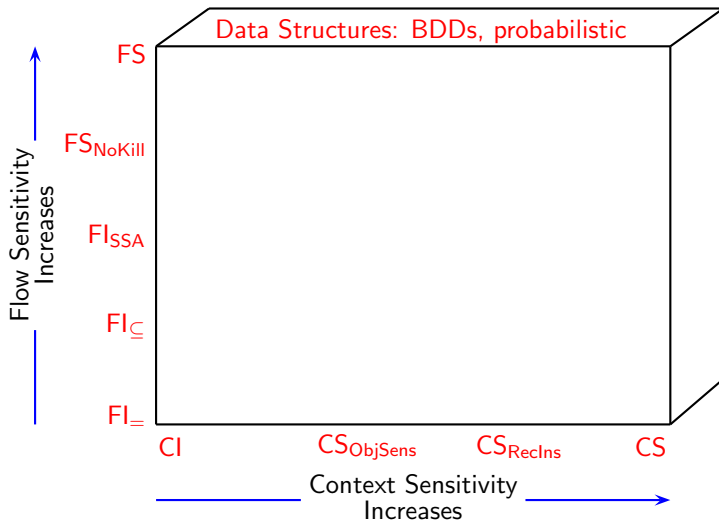
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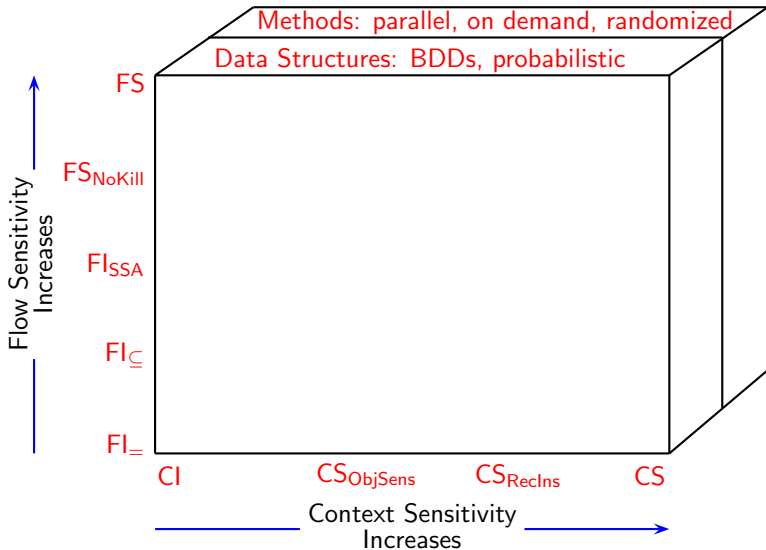
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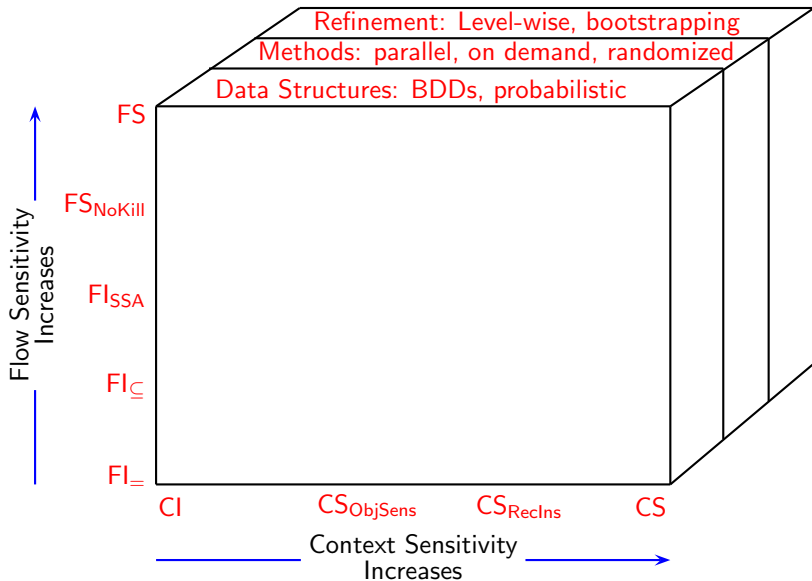


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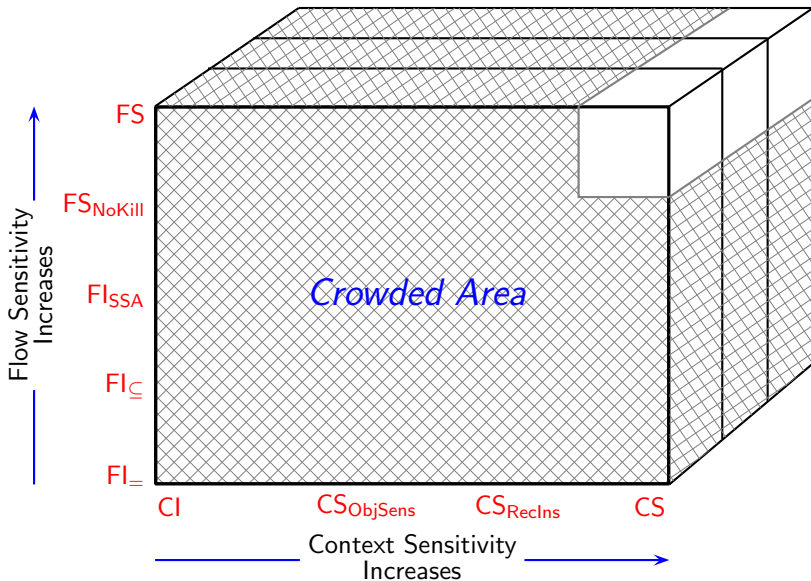




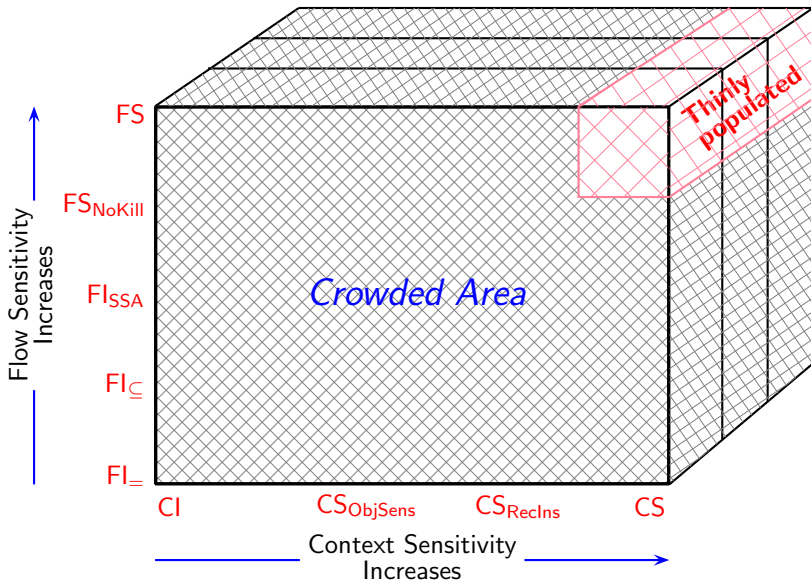
# Pointer Analysis: An Engineer's Landscape



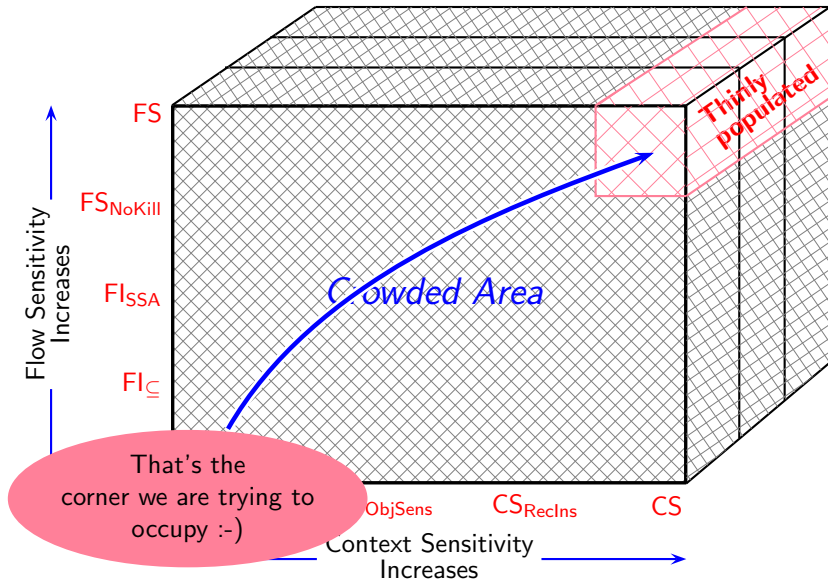
# Pointer Analysis: An Engineer's Landscape



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## In Search of Abstractions for Precision Without Inefficiency


Desired Abstraction	Enabling Abstraction	Status of our work
Flow sensitivity		
Context sensitivity (Caller sensitivity)		
Precise heap abstraction		
Precise call structure		



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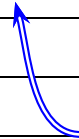
Restrict the computation only to the usable data. Weave liveness discovery into the analysis




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	High level abstraction of memory	Partial accomplishment (SAS16)
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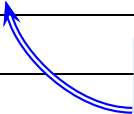
Postpone low level connections explicated by the classical points-to facts



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Flow sensitivity	Joint liveness and points-to analysis	Partial accomplishment (SAS12)
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Context sensitivity (Caller sensitivity)	Value contexts	Mature accomplishment (CC08, SAS12, SOAP13)
Precise heap abstraction		
Precise call structure		

Distinguish between contexts by their data flow values and not their call chains






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Desired Abstraction	Enabling Abstraction	Status of our work
Flow sensitivity	Joint liveness and points-to analysis	Partial accomplishment
	High level abstraction of memory	Partial accomplishment
Context sensitivity (Caller sensitivity)	Value contexts	Partial accomplishment (P13)
	GPG based bottom-up summary flow functions	Mature accomplishment (SAS16)
Precise heap abstraction		
Precise call structure		

Avoid recomputations for each context. Use a higher level abstraction of memory.



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Context sensitivity (Caller sensitivity)	Value contexts	Partial accomplishment (P13)
	GPG based block summary flow	Partial accomplishment
Precise heap abstraction	Liveness access graphs	Partial accomplishment (TOPLAS07)
Precise call structure		

Identify the part of heap actually accessed in terms of patterns of accesses



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	Access based abstraction	Mature accomplishment (ISMM17)
Precise call structure		

Distinguish between heap locations based on how they are accessed and not how they are allocated



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	Access based abstraction	ent
Precise call structure	Callee sensitivity	Work in progress

Call strings record call *history*. We need to record call *future* also.



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Precise heap abstraction	Liveness access graphs	Work in progress
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Precise call structure	Callee sensitivity	Work in progress
	Virtual call resolution	Work in progress

Make the call graph more precise by computing a more precise set of callees



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*We are destined to a long haul with no guarantees :-)*



*Part 2*

# *Some Short Trips*

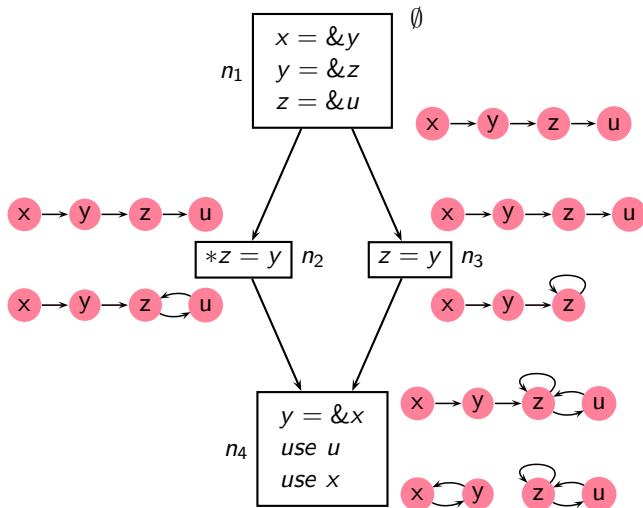
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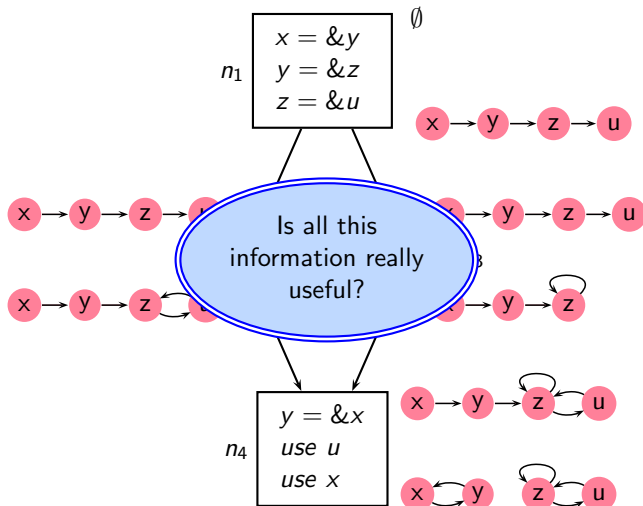




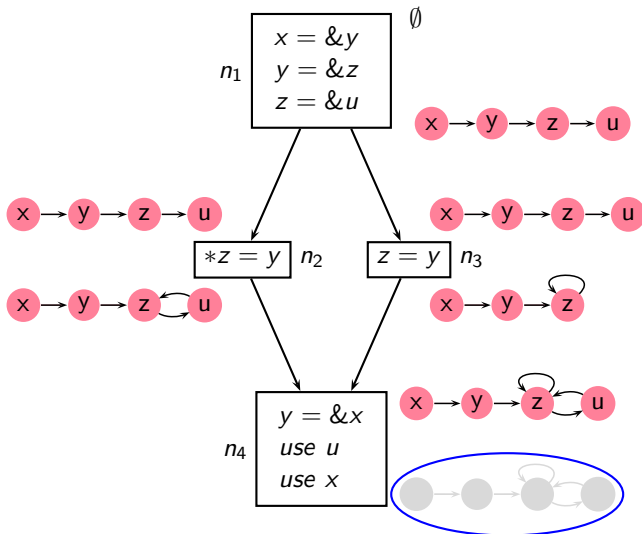
# Liveness Based Pointer Analysis: Motivation



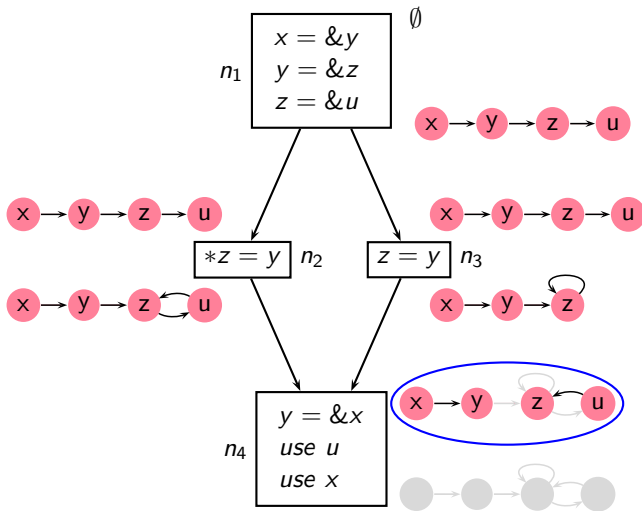
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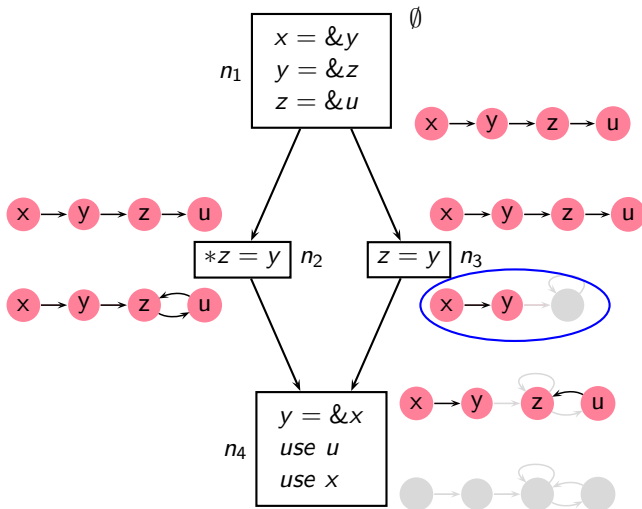
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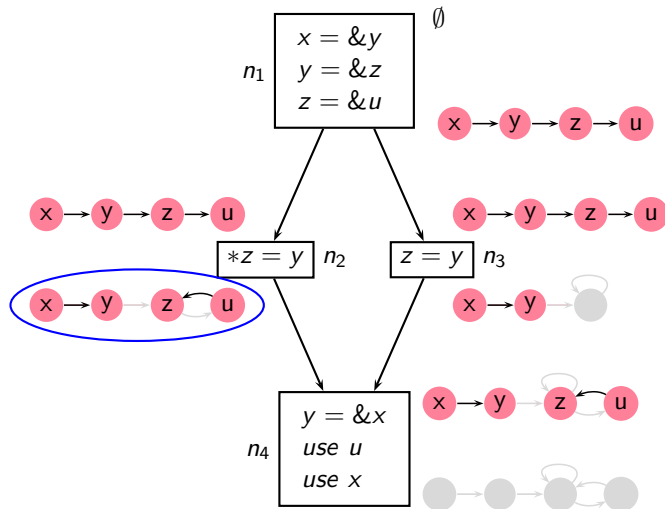
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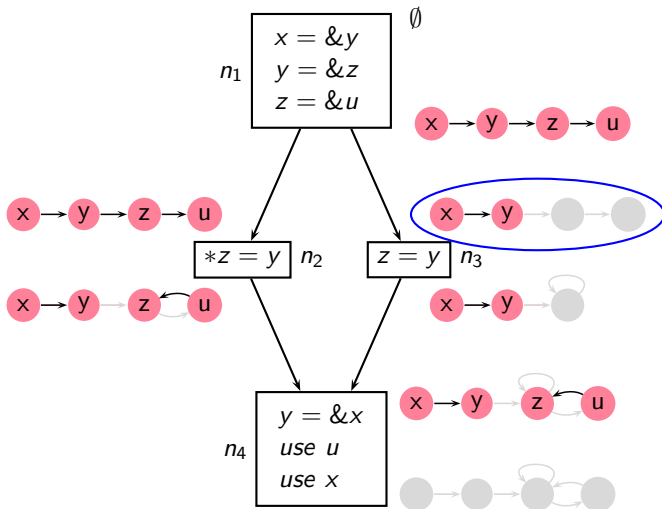
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## Liveness Based Points-to Analysis (SAS-2012)

- Mutual dependence of liveness and points-to information
  - ▶ Define points-to information only for live pointers
  - ▶ For pointer indirections, define liveness information using points-to information
- Use call strings method for full flow and context sensitivity
  - ▶ Value based termination of call strings construction (CC-2008)
- Use strong liveness





## Liveness Based Interprocedural Points-to Analysis: Empirical Measurements

- Observations on SPEC CPU 2006 benchmarks in GCC 4.6.0  
(Prashant Singh Rawat, IITB 2012)

Usable pointer information is small and sparse

No of Points-to pairs	Percentage of basic blocks
0	64-96%
1-4	9-25%
5-8	0-10%
8+	0-4%



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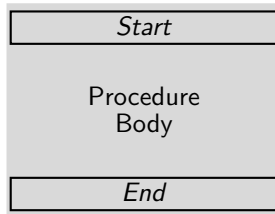
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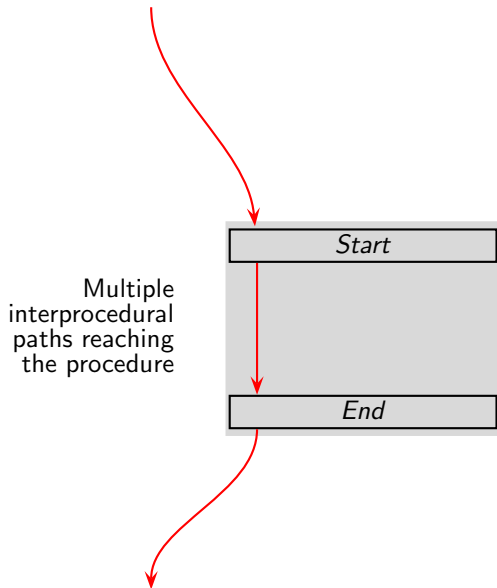
- Independently implemented and verified in
  - ▶ LLVM (Dylan McDermott, Cambridge, 2016) and
  - ▶ GCC 4.7.2 (Priyanka Sawant, IITB, 2016)



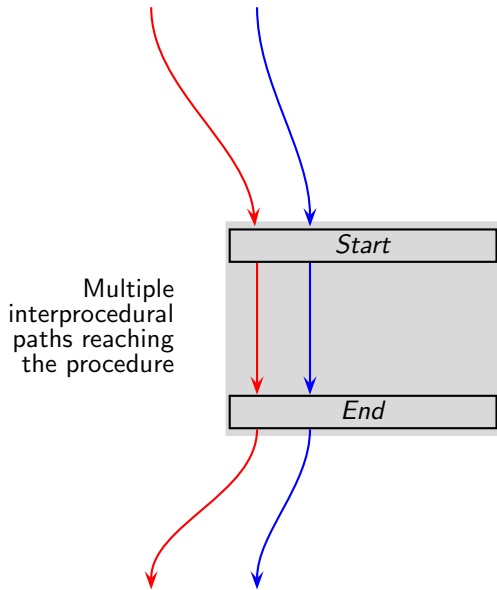
# Value Contexts (CC-2008, SAS-2012, SOAP-2013)



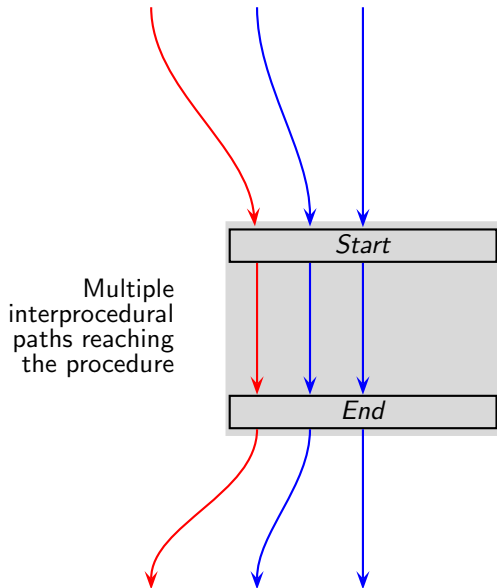
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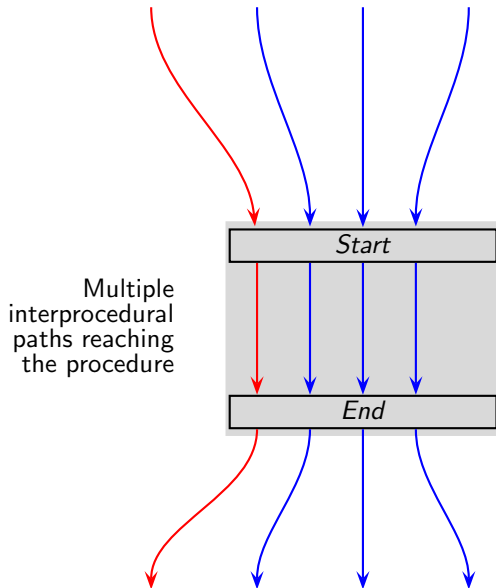
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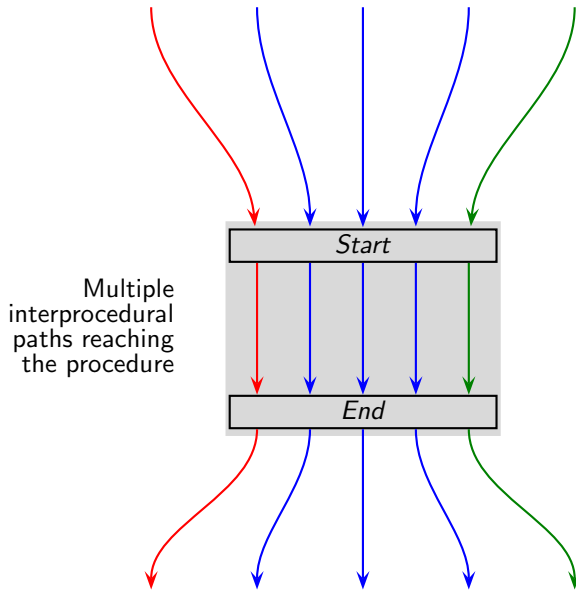


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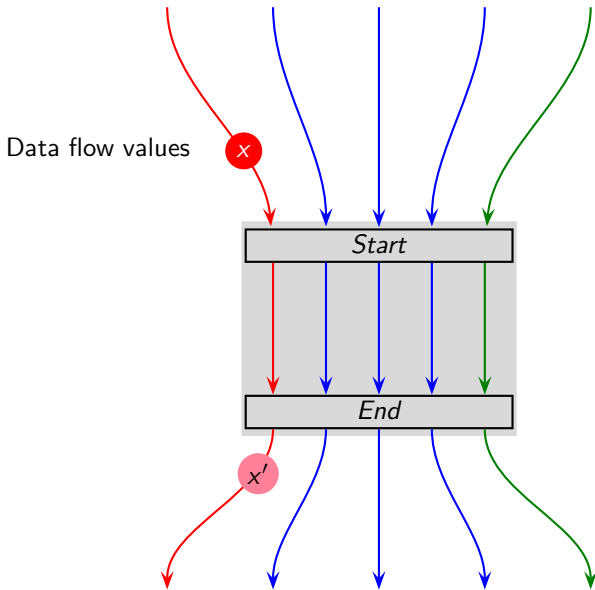




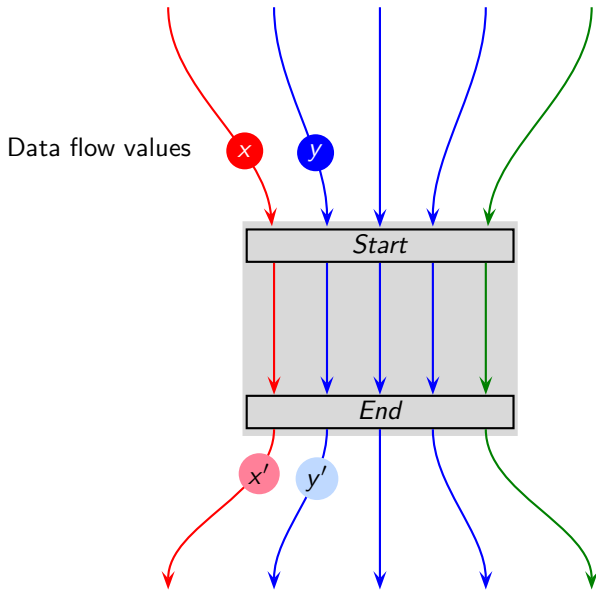
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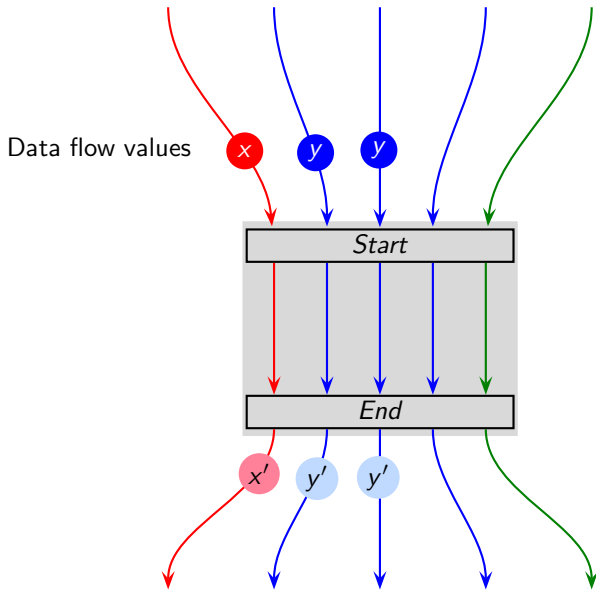
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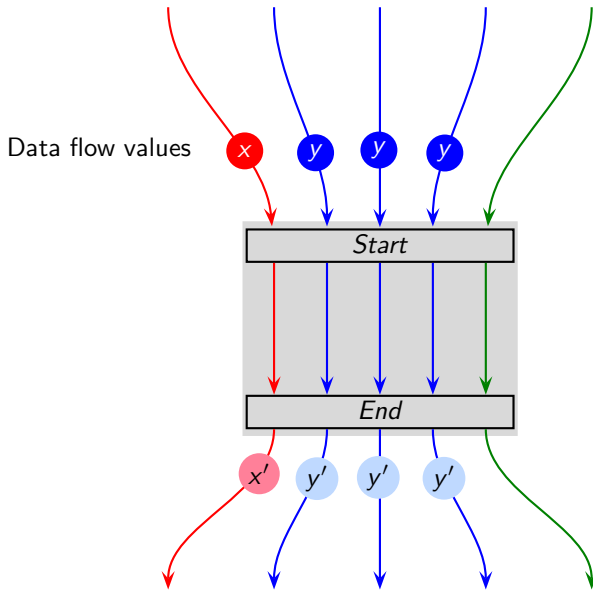
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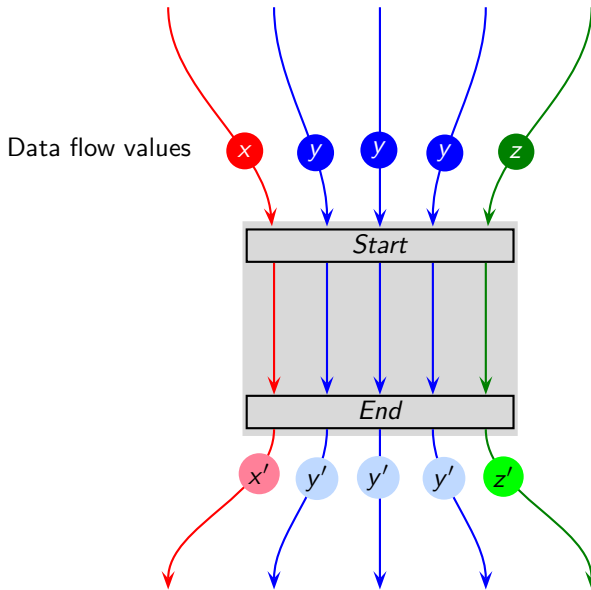
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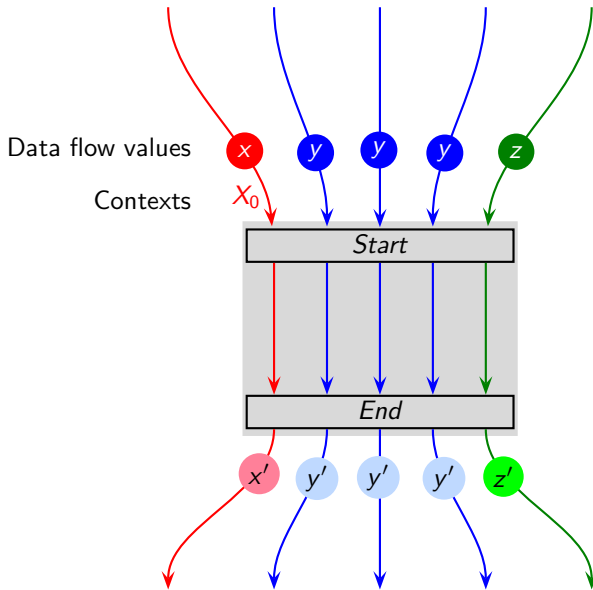
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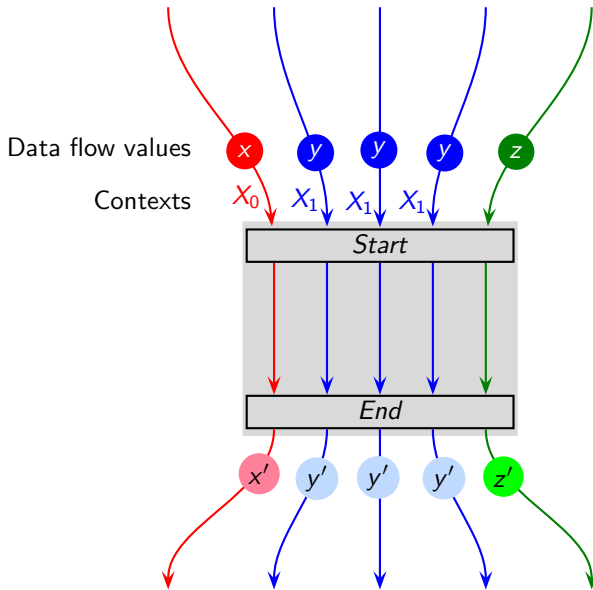
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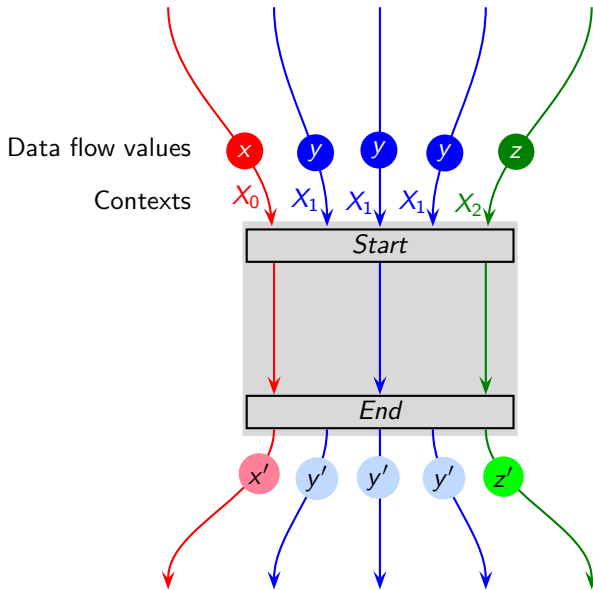


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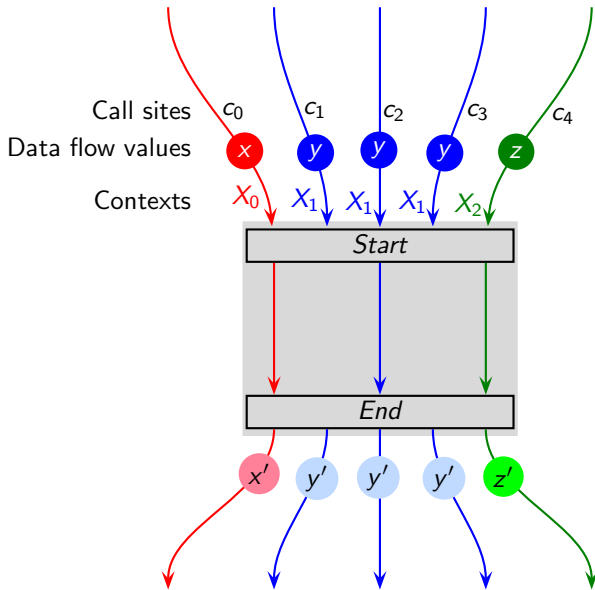




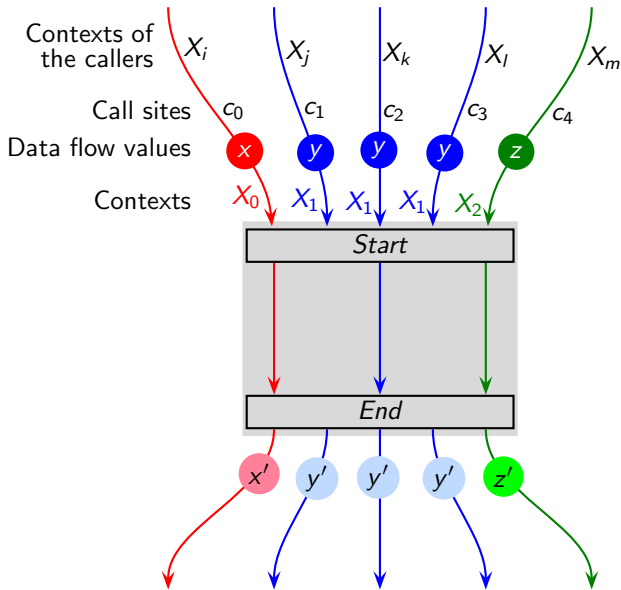
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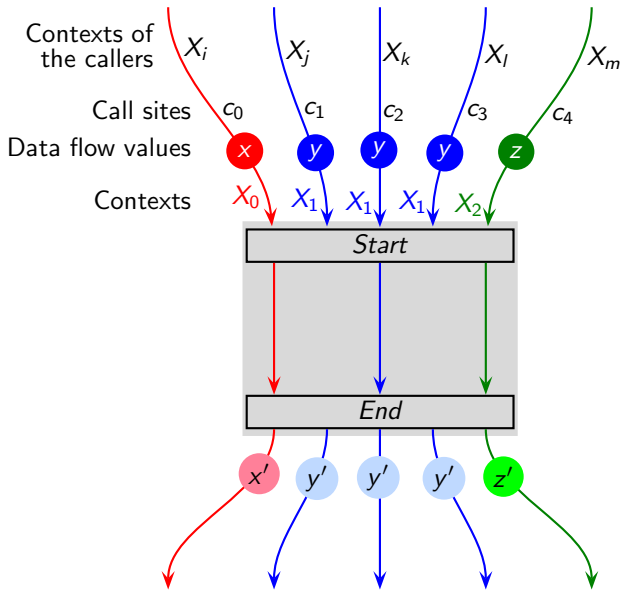
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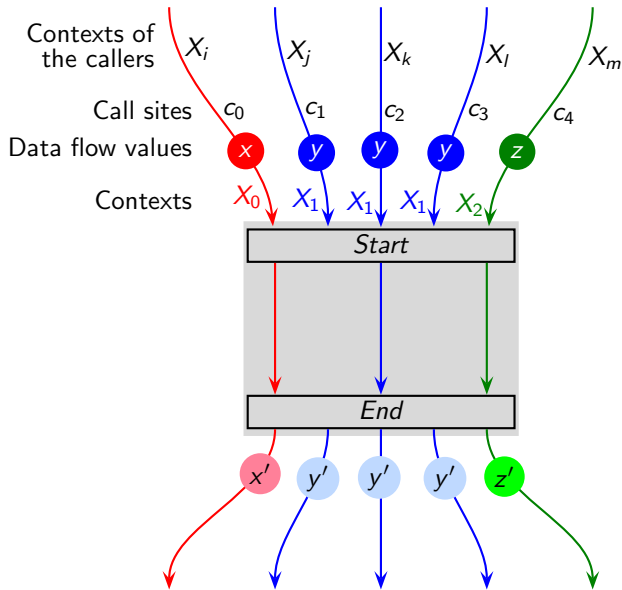
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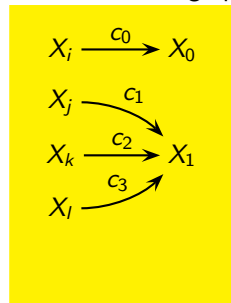
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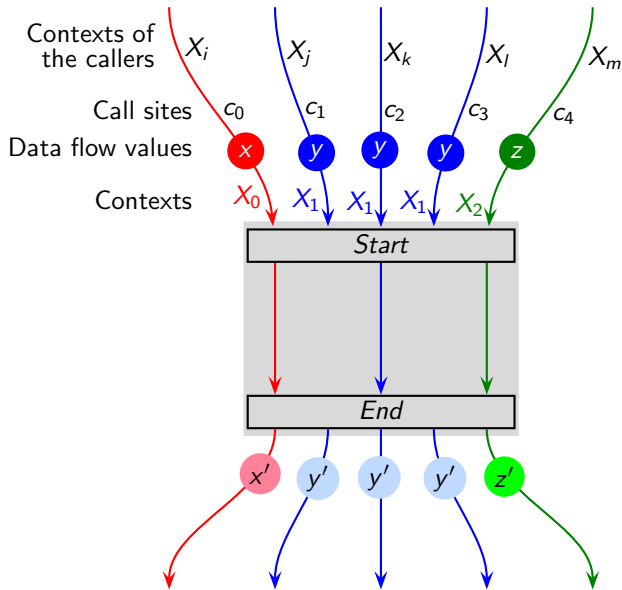
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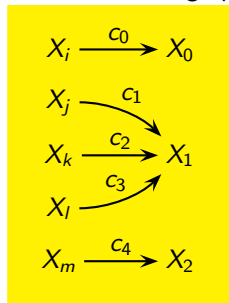
Context transition graph



# Value Contexts (CC-2008, SAS-2012, SOAP-2013)



Context transition graph



## Value Contexts (CC-2008, SAS-2012, SOAP-2013)

Analyze a procedure once for an input data flow value

- The number of times a procedure is analyzed reduces dramatically
- Similar to the tabulation based method of functional approach [Sharir-Pnueli, 1981]

However,

- ▶ Value contexts record calling contexts too  
Useful for context matching across program analyses
- ▶ Can avoid some reprocessing even when a new input value is found



## Empirical Observations About Value Contexts

- Reaching definitions analysis in GCC 4.2.0 (CC-2008)

Analysis of Towers of Hanoi

- ▶ Time brought down from  $3.973 \times 10^6$  ms to 2.37 ms
- ▶ No of call strings brought down from  $10^6+$  to 8





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- Generic Interprocedural Analysis Framework in SOOT (SOAP-2013)

Empirical observations on SPECJVM98 and DaCapo 2006 benchmarks for on-the-fly call graph construction

- ▶ Average number of contexts per procedure lies in the range 4-25
- ▶ Much fewer long call chains than in the default call graph constructed using SPARK
  - For length 7, less than 50%
  - For length 10, less than 5%



# Classical Points-to Facts: A Low Level Abstraction of Memory for Points-to Analysis

```
f()  
{  
    *x = y  
}
```

x

y

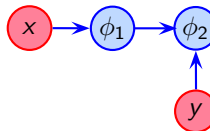
All variables are global

Red nodes are known named locations



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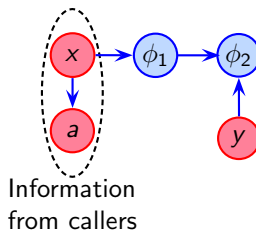
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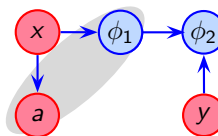
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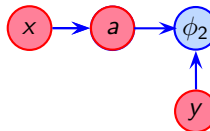
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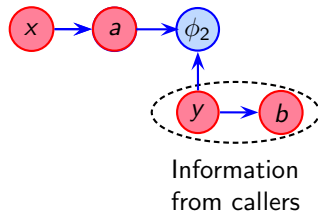
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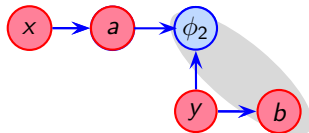
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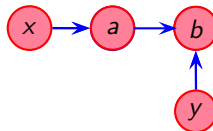
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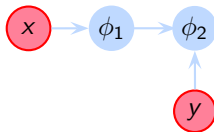
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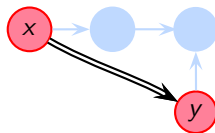


Blue arrows are low level view of memory in terms of classical points-to facts



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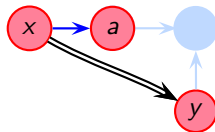


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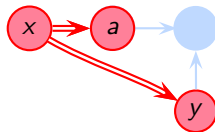


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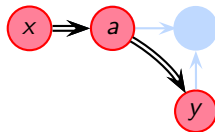


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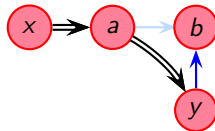


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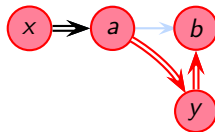


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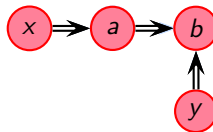
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# Generalized Points-to Graphs (GPGs) for Points-to Analysis (SAS-2016)

Construction of bottom up summary flow functions using GPGs

- Issues at intraprocedural level

Flow sensitivity, strong and weak updates, efficiency using SSA form

- Issues at interprocedural level

Context sensitivity: Composition of callee's GPGs within callers

Efficiency using bypassing of irrelevant information

- Handling advanced features

Function Pointers, Heap, Structures, Union, Arrays, Pointer Arithmetic

- Theoretical issues. Soundness and complexity

- Implementation and measurements

Using LTO framework in GCC 4.7.2 scaling to 158 KLoC



# Heap Reference Analysis [TOPLAS 2007]

- Problem.
- Our Objectives.
- Main Challenge.
- Our Key Idea.
- Current status.
- Further Work.



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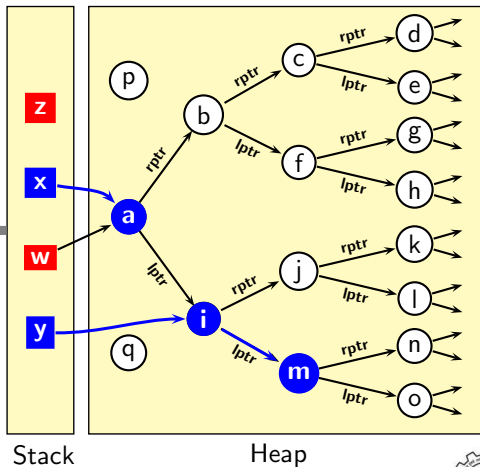
# Which Heap Memory Nodes Can be Statically Marked as Live?

If the **while** loop is not executed even once.

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1  w = x      // x points to ma
2  while (x.data < max)
3      x = x.rptr
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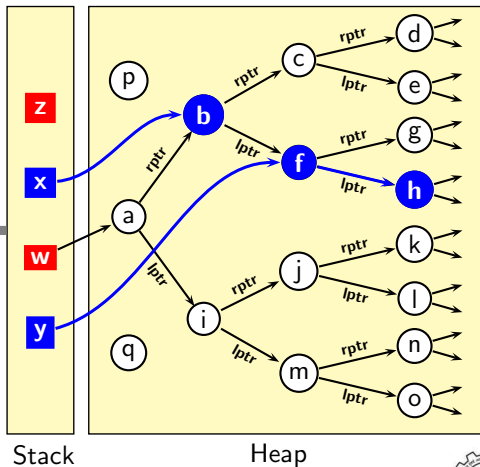
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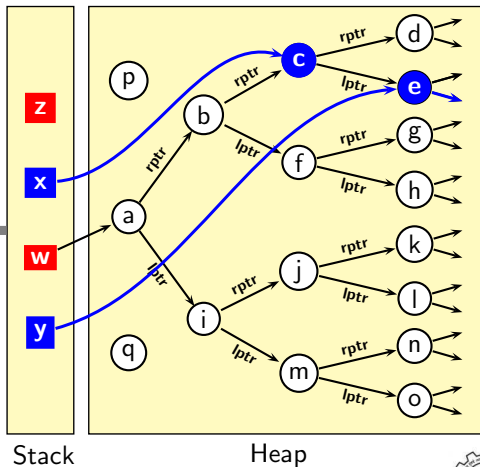
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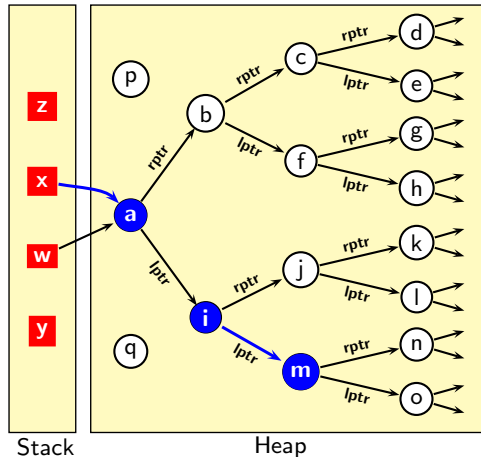
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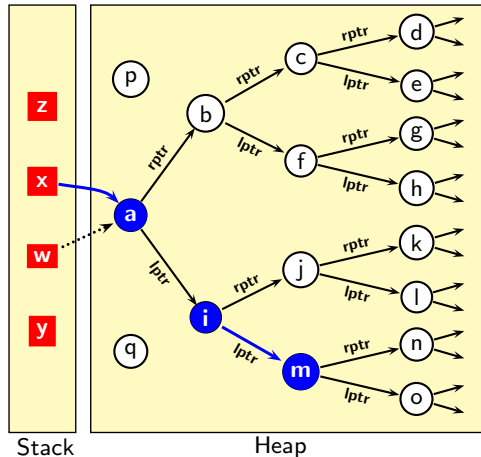
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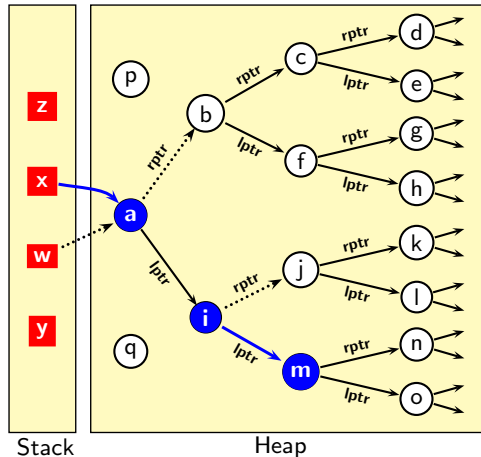


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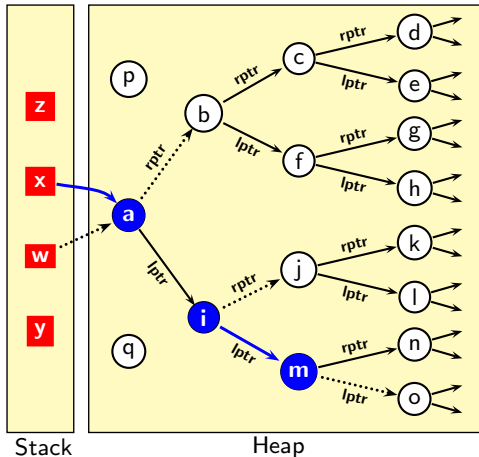


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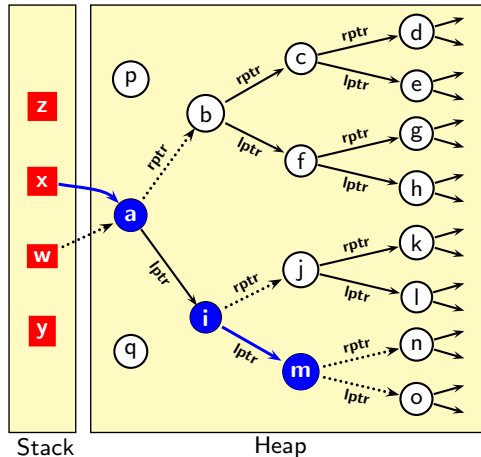


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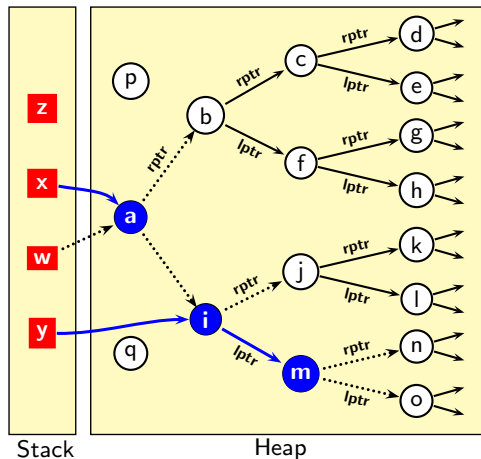
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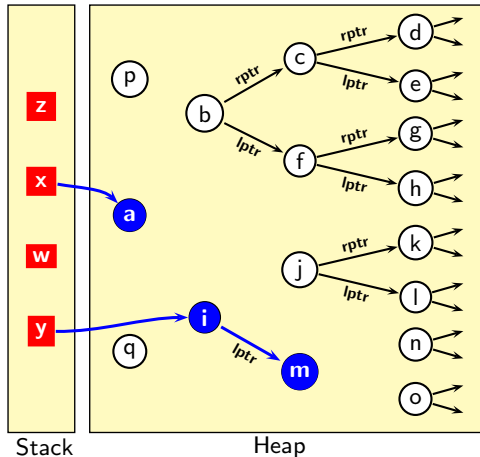
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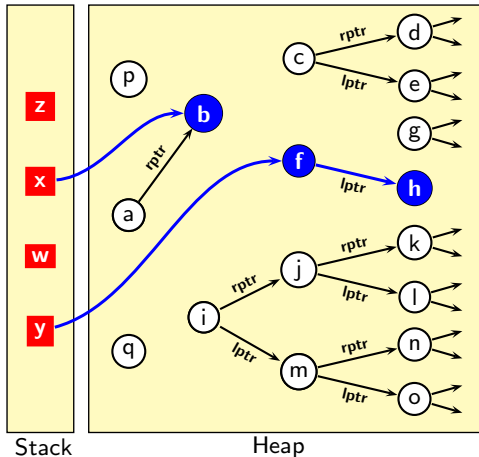
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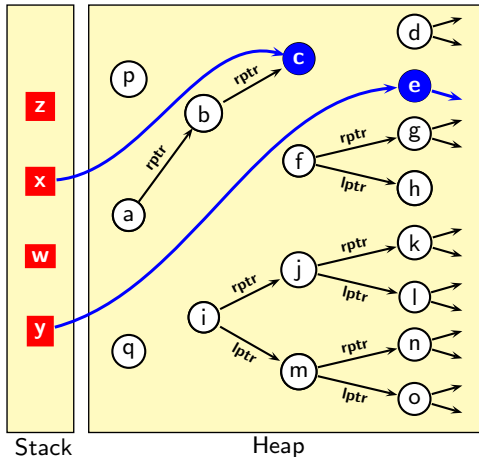
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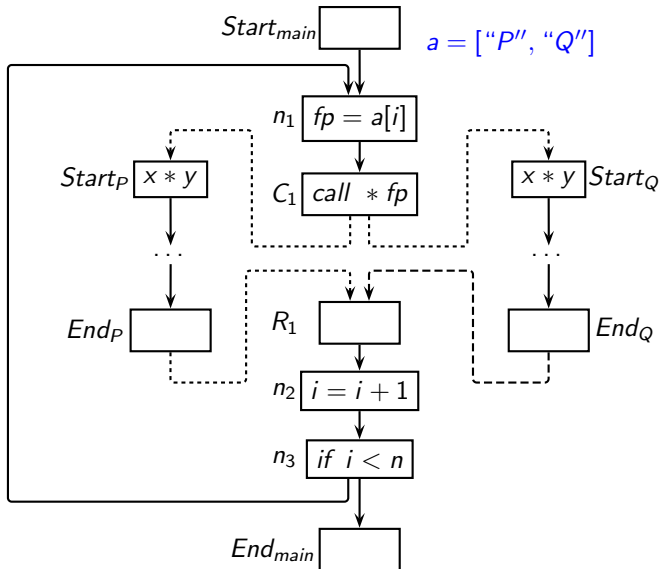
# Precise Construction of Call Graphs (or Constructing Callee Contexts)

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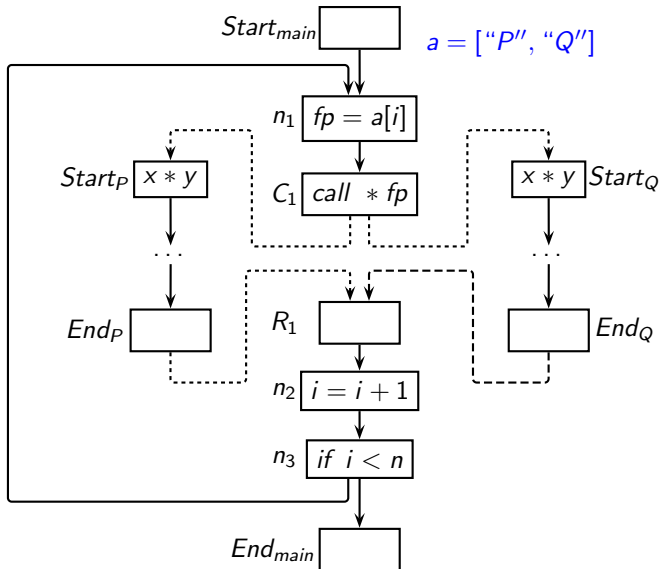




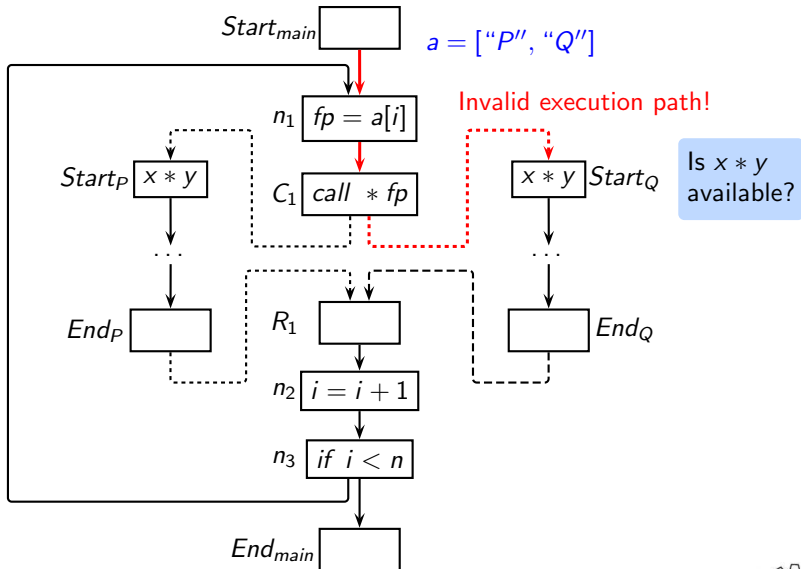
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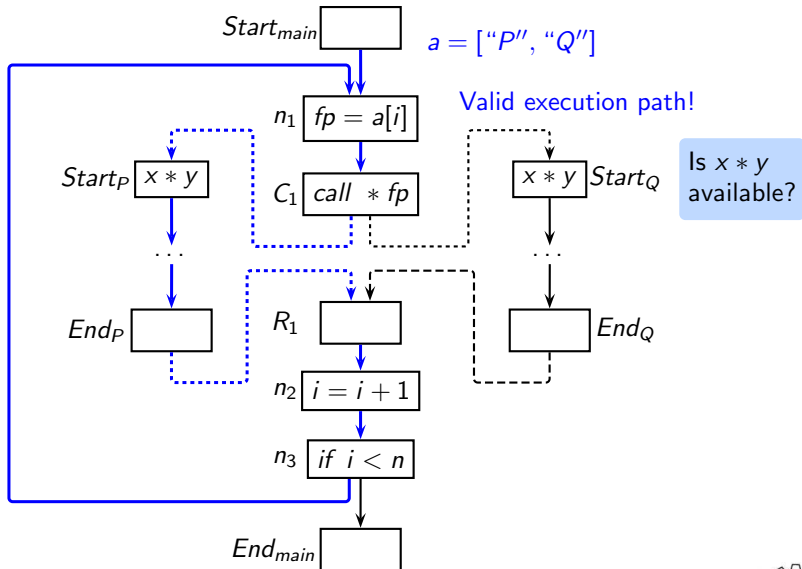
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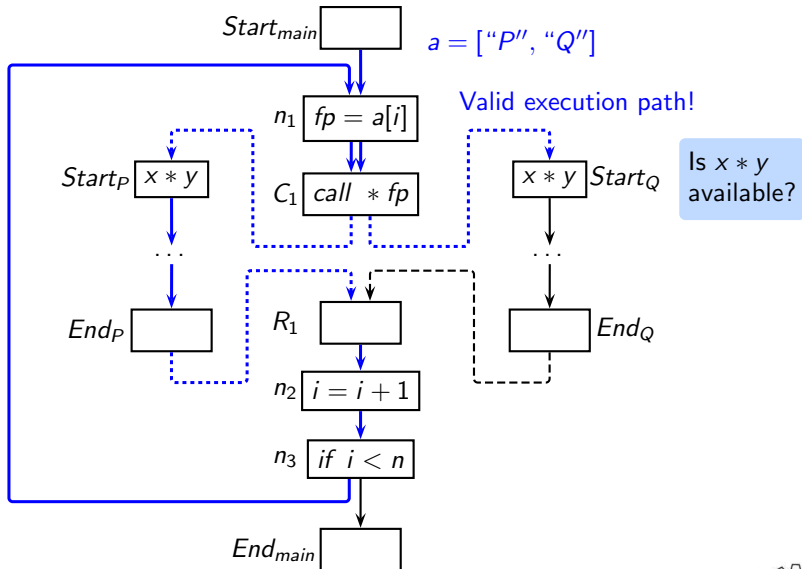
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- **Additional Benefits.** Precise analysis of programs in object oriented languages



*Part 3*

# *Conclusions*

## Observations

- Data flow propagation in real programs seems to involve a much smaller subset of all possible data flow values

*In large programs that work properly, pointer usage is very disciplined and the core information is very small!*

- Earlier approaches reported inefficiency and non-scalability because they computed far more information than required because they
  - ▶ did not separate the usable information from unusable information, and
  - ▶ used low level abstractions of memory

Their focus was on

- ▶ approximating information to reduce the size, or
- ▶ storing and accessing the information more efficiently



# A Spectrum of Possible Ways of Performing Computation

exhaustive  
computation

computation  
restricted  
to usable  
information

avoiding  
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demand driven  
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← What should be computed? →

Maximum Computation

Minimum Computation

← When should it be computed? →

Early Computation

Late Computation



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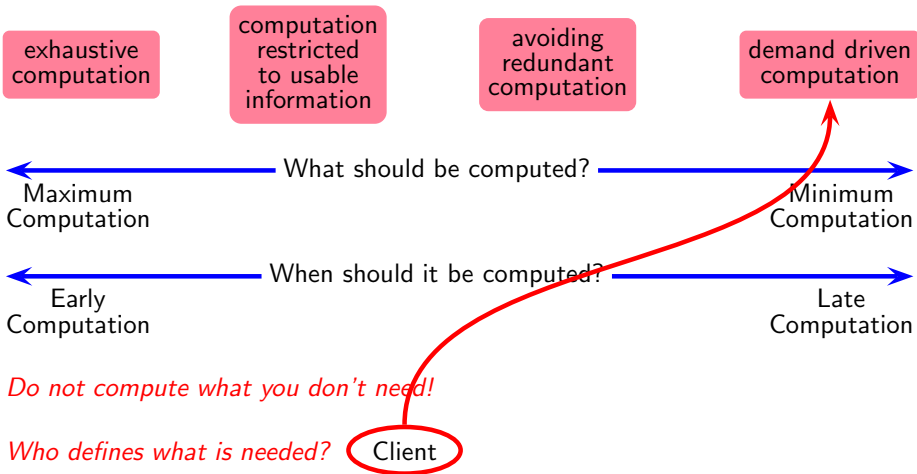
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*Do not compute what you don't need!*

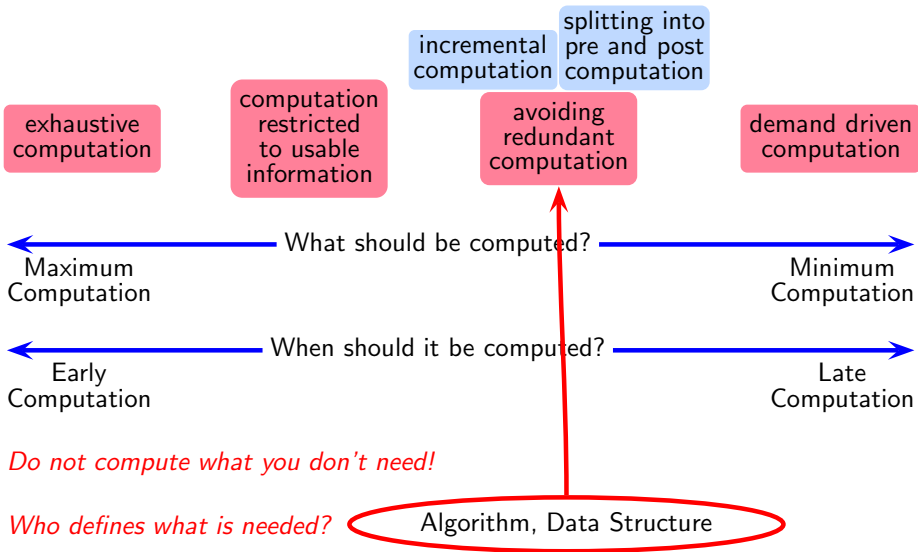
*Who defines what is needed?*



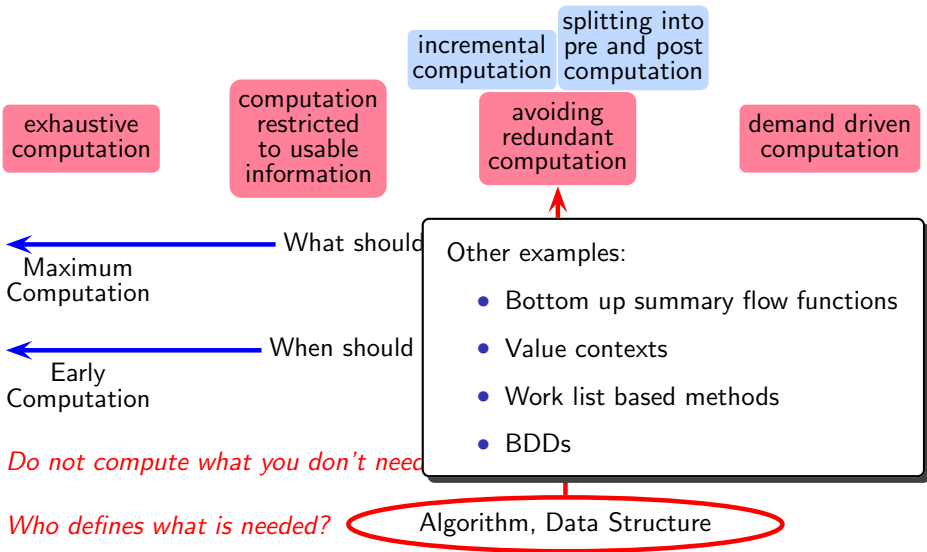
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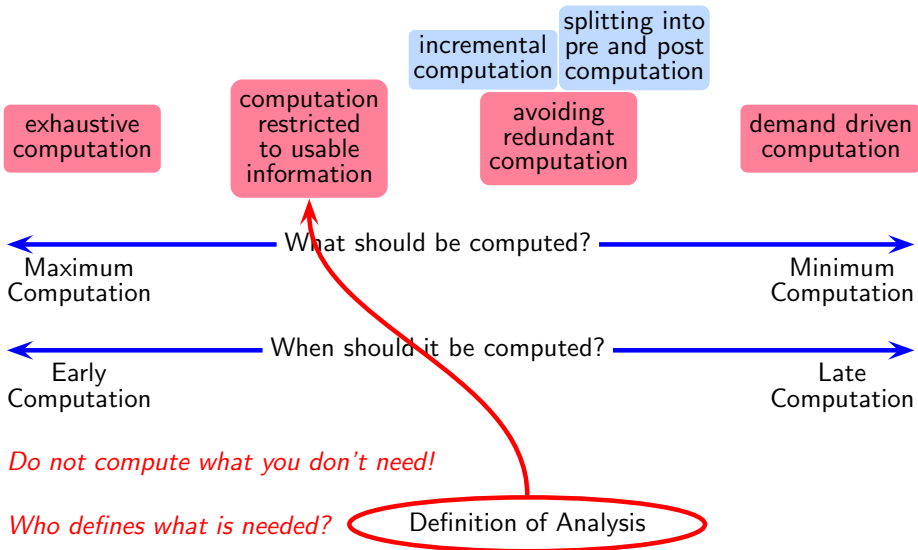


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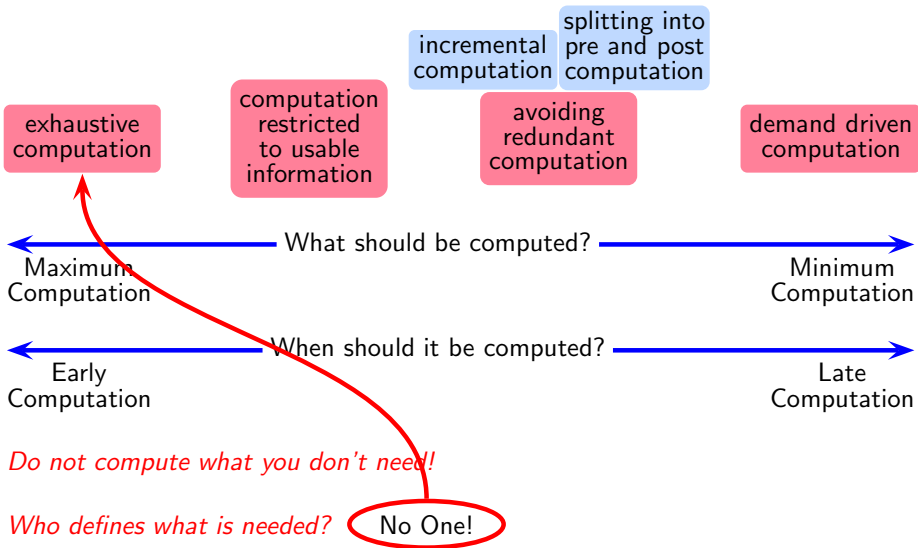




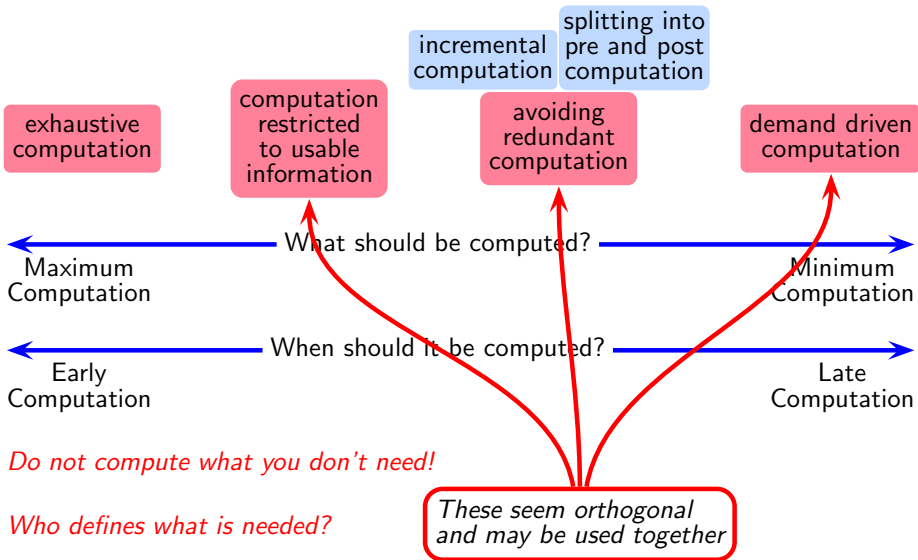
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## Conclusions

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Our experience of points-to analysis shows that

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This encouraged us to explore bottom summary flow functions for points-to analysis

- ▶ which reduced the number of times a procedure is processed and ...
- ▶ gave rise to generalized points-to facts... .
- ▶ which reduced the size of intermediate points-to graphs...



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Our ex

- ▶ U
- ▶ w
- ▶ w

Approximations should come *after*  
building abstractions and *not before*

This en

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## Acknowledgements

Alan Mycroft,  
Alefiya Lightwala  
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Priyanka Sawant,  
Rohan Padhye,  
Shubhangi Agrawal,  
Sudakshina Das,  
Swati Rathi,  
Vini Kanvar,  
Vinit Deodhar

... and many more





## Last But Not the Least

*Thank You!*

