

Transfinite Iteration of Functors as an Extensional Reflection, being Part II of A Categorical Replacement for Replacement

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Induction and recursion as magic

You know from experience of **proofs by induction** that the **cognitively difficult** part is **formulating a sufficiently general predicate**.

Then it may be **laborious** to show that each **step** preserves the predicate.

After that, **magically** you can deduce that the predicate is always true, in particular at the end (so long as it was true at the beginning).

It all works because we **assert** Peano (or some other) induction **as an axiom**.

Aesthetic completeness of a theory

The first genuinely mathematical application of the **Axiom-Scheme of Replacement** was by Johann von Neumann in 1923, when he showed that any well-ordering is equivalent to one in which the order relation is membership.

Contemporary set theorists (including Ernst Zermelo, who was opposed to the re-formulation in First Order Logic) accepted the new axiom because they **considered that their theory was incomplete without it**.

It does have **applications outside set theory**, in particular to **transfinite iteration of functors**, of which the Cumulative (“von Neumann”) Hierarchy is the leading example.

To me, Set Theory is a Religion and I am an Atheist.

This talk will be strictly about Category Theory.

The new principle that I will demonstrate is similarly one that “ought” to be part of a “complete” theory of our subject.

Categorical Replacement as magic

Similarly, when using “Categorical Replacement”, the **labour** will be in constructing various categories and characterising the relevant properties in them.

These laborious properties will be:

- ▶ **pullbacks,**
- ▶ **well-foundedness,**
- ▶ **factorisation systems** and
- ▶ **extensionality.**

The **magical result** will be transfinite recursion.

The Proposed new principle was shown to be valid in Intuitionistic Zermelo–Fraenkel Set Theory in my ItaCa lecture on 18 November 2025 (“Part I”). See www.paultaylor.eu/ordinals/ for the slides.

Well founded coalgebras

A coalgebra $\alpha : A \rightarrow TA$ is **well founded** if:
for any subobject $i : U \hookrightarrow A$
such that the pullback H factors through U ,

$$\begin{array}{ccc} TU & \xrightarrow{Ti} & TA \\ \uparrow & \lrcorner & \uparrow \alpha \\ H & \xrightarrow{\quad} & U \xrightarrow{i} A \end{array}$$

in fact $i : U \cong A$. (I call this a **broken pullback**.)

In the case of $T \equiv \mathcal{P}$ in a topos, this happens (for all U) iff
the relation ($<$) corresponding to α obeys the **induction scheme**

$$\frac{\forall y. (\forall z. z < y \Rightarrow \phi z) \Rightarrow \phi y}{\forall x. \phi x}$$

for all predicates ϕ on A .

Extensionality

The less-than-innocent first axiom of Zermelo set theory:

A binary relation ($<$) is **extensional** if it satisfies

$$\frac{\forall z. z < x \iff z < y}{x = y}$$

for all $x, y \in A$.

This is equivalent to $\alpha : A \rightarrow \mathcal{P}A$ being **1-1**.

We generalise this to any functor $T : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{X}$ on any category
by saying that α is **mono**.

The initial T -algebra (if there is one) is
a (the terminal) extensional well founded coalgebra.

The **key innovation** is that we further generalise this
by replacing “plain” monos with
the $\mathcal{M}$ class of a **factorisation system**.

Extensional well founded coalgebras are like sets

Even with general functors and factorisation systems,

- ▶ there is **at most one homomorphism**
between any two extensional well founded coalgebras;
- ▶ this homomorphism is **in $\mathcal{M}$** ;
- ▶ there are **directed unions**;
- ▶ there are **binary intersections**, just like for sets;
- ▶ there are **overlapping unions**, just like for sets,
so long as the base category has well behaved pushouts.

So these properties of set-theoretic inclusion *etc.*,
which are really weird from a categorical point of view,
naturally arise from the general situation that we are
considering.

This theory is developed in my paper
Well founded coalgebras and recursion.

The key properties for our application again

Because of their similarity to set theory,
extensional well founded coalgebras will be called **ensembles**.

The **category Ens** of ensembles and coalgebra homomorphisms
is **actually** a (large) **preorder**.

Applying the functor **remains** within this preorder.

Forming **colimits** also remains within this preorder,
but this requires some care.

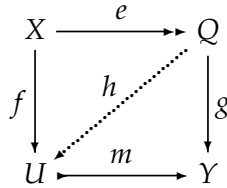
Therefore **whatever “transfinite” means**,
iteration of the functor also remains within the preorder.

This matters because then **the colimits are just joins**.

Constructive ordinals are non-trivial posets,
not just successors or chains,
so they do not define “categorical” diagrams.

Factorisation systems

Recall that this has two classes $\mathcal{E}$ and $\mathcal{M}$ that each contain all isomorphisms, such that every map factorises as $e; m$ and the classes are **orthogonal** in this sense:



There is a unique map h making both triangles commute.

For our application, additionally

- ▶ $\mathcal{M}$ -maps must have the cancellation property of monos;
- ▶ the functor T must preserve this class; and
- ▶ $\mathcal{M}$ must also be closed under directed unions.

Ordinals as coalgebras

We replace **Set** by **Pos**, where pullbacks are constructed as in **Set**.

Instead of the *full* covariant powerset $\mathcal{P}$, we use the **lower subsets functor** $\mathcal{D}$.

We have a choice of factorisation systems, with $\mathcal{M}$ -class

- ▶ $\mathcal{I}$ plain monos (1–1 on points): not closed under $\mathcal{D}$;
- ▶ $\mathcal{R}$ regular monos (subsets with the restricted order): $\mathcal{D}$ preserves $\mathcal{R}$ but not its inverse images;
- ▶ $\mathcal{L}$ lower subsets: $\mathcal{D}$ preserves $\mathcal{L}$ and inverse images.

Their orthogonal $\mathcal{E}$ classes are

- ▶ $\mathcal{R}^\perp$ plain epis (surjective on points); and
- ▶ $\mathcal{L}^\perp$ cofinal functions — **by no means surjective!**

The idea is to use $\mathcal{E}$ classes like $\mathcal{L}^\perp$ to **build skyscrapers**.

The Proposal for Replacement

The new axiom that we propose is that **every well founded coalgebra have an extensional reflection**.

It is an axiom-**scheme** like the set-theoretic version because we assert this **for all** suitable **categories, functors and factorisation systems**.

As with other notions of recursion, the expressivity comes from **constructing** suitable categories, functors and factorisation systems.

There is some labour required to characterise the pullbacks, well-foundedness, factorisation and extensionality.

$\mathcal{R}$ - and $\mathcal{L}$ -ordinals

A coalgebra $A \rightarrow \mathcal{D}A$ in **Pos** has $\leq$ and $<$ related by

$$c < b \leq a \implies c < a \quad \text{and} \quad c \leq b < a \implies c < a.$$

Well-foundedness of $<$ is the same as in **Set** (for both $\mathcal{R}$ and $\mathcal{L}$).

Then $(A, \leq, <)$ is **$\mathcal{R}$ -extensional** iff it is **meta-transitive**:

$$(\forall d. d < c \implies d < b) \wedge (b < a) \implies (c < a).$$

For example, $(\mathbb{N}, \leq, <)$ satisfies this.

Intuitionistically, this is stronger than ordinary transitivity, which cannot be characterised using these ideas.

$\mathcal{L}$ -extensional well founded $\mathcal{D}$ -coalgebras are **plump ordinals**.

$\mathcal{R}$ - and $\mathcal{L}$ -extensional reflection (rank)

Since $\mathcal{R}^\perp$ is **well co-powered**,
the theory in *Well founded coalgebras and recursion*,
within an elementary topos,
gives the $\mathcal{R}$ -extensional reflection of any well founded relation.

Ignoring the distinction between transitive and meta-transitive,
this is the usual notion of **ordinal rank**.

On the other hand, $\mathcal{L}^\perp$ is **not** well co-powered.

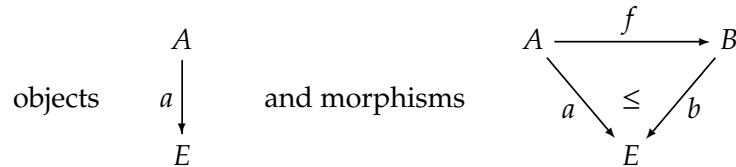
Plump $\omega \cdot 2$ in $\mathbf{Set}^\rightarrow$ requires the axiom of replacement.

In general **plump rank is an example of our proposal**.

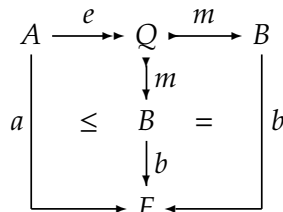
We may use either $\mathcal{R}$ or $\mathcal{L}$ to define “transfinite” in what follows, but $\mathcal{R}$ has the advantage that “combinatorial” ordinals like $(N, \leq, <)$ are $\mathcal{R}$ -extensional.

Transfinite recursion 2

We will work in the **lax slice category** $\mathbf{Pos} // E$ with



that **factorise** as $f = e ; m$ with $e \in \mathcal{E}$, $m \in \mathcal{M}$ and



Orthogonality of these classes $\mathcal{E} // E$ and $\mathcal{M} // E$ follows from that of $\mathcal{E}, \mathcal{M} \subset \mathbf{Pos}$, plus an easily provable inequality.

Transfinite recursion

Suppose we have a complete join-semilattice $(E, \vee)$ together with a monotone endofunction $s : E \rightarrow E$.

Then **transfinite recursion** over an ordinal $(A, \leq, <)$ means a monotone function $f : A \rightarrow E$ such that

$$f(a) = \bigvee_E \{s(fb) \mid b < a\}.$$

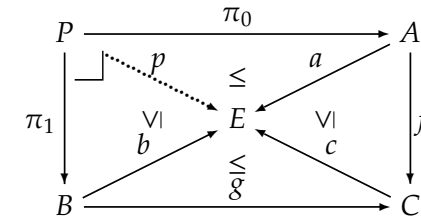
We also call this **transfinite iteration of the function s**.

We will construct a category, factorisation system and endo-function such that the extensional reflection is this transfinite recursion.

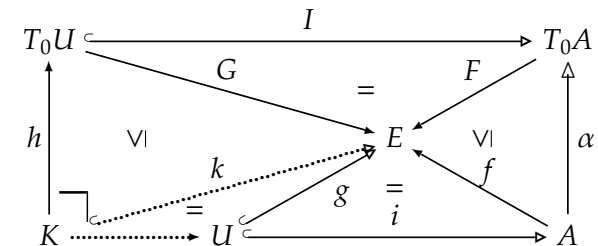
After that we will replace the legitimate $\vee$ -semilattice E with the illegitimate preorder **Ens**.

Transfinite recursion 3

Pullbacks and well-foundedness are the same as in **Pos** and **Set** but with suitable extra maps and inequalities:



where $p \equiv \pi_0 ; a \wedge \pi_a ; b$.



Transfinite recursion 4

The **endofunctor** $\mathbf{R} : \mathbf{Pos} // E \rightarrow \mathbf{Pos} // E$ on objects is

$$\mathbf{R}(A \xrightarrow{f} E) \equiv (\mathcal{D}A \xrightarrow{F} E),$$

where $FU \equiv \bigvee \{s(fa) \mid a \in U\}$ and on morphisms it is

$$\mathbf{R}p \equiv \mathcal{D}p : U \mapsto \bigvee \{b \mid \exists a \in U. b \leq pa\}.$$

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A & \xrightarrow{p} & B \\ f \searrow & \leq & \swarrow g \\ & E & \end{array} \quad \mapsto \quad \begin{array}{ccc} \mathcal{D}A & \xrightarrow{\mathcal{D}p} & \mathcal{D}B \\ F \searrow & \leq? & \swarrow G \\ & E & \end{array}$$

which is a $\mathbf{Pos} // E$ -map because

$$FU \equiv \bigvee \{fa \mid a \in U\} \leq \bigvee \{g(pa) \mid a \in U\} = G(\mathcal{D}pU).$$

This is equality if $f = p ; g$, so **R preserves $\mathcal{M} // E$ -maps**.

From functions to functors

The idea is to replace the **internal** $\bigvee$ -semilattice E with the **external** category **Ens** that is a preorder.

We don't use universes (big sets, internal toposes, *etc.*), because they detract from what makes Replacement interesting.

The order **relation** in **Ens** corresponds to underlying **functions**.

(For simplicity, we consider iterating an endofunctor of **Set**.)

The **lex slice category** $\mathbf{Pos} // E$ becomes the category **DFPos** of **discrete opfibrations of posets**.

But making the Grothendieck construction part of the argument uses Replacement more or less as set theorists state it.

We have to build the opfibred analogue of **Ens** so that the **colimits become joins** in the functor that encodes recursion over an ordinal.

The transfinite recursion theorem

An **R-coalgebra**

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A & \xrightarrow{\alpha} & \mathcal{D}A \\ f \searrow & \leq & \swarrow F \\ & E & \end{array}$$

has

$$fa \leq F(\alpha a) \equiv \bigvee \{s(fb) \mid b < a\}.$$

It is **extensional** iff $\leq$ is equality and $\alpha \in \mathcal{M} \subset \mathbf{Pos}$.

A solution of the **transfinite recursion** equation is therefore exactly an **$\mathcal{M} // E$ -extensional R-coalgebra** whose underlying $\mathcal{M}$ -extensional well founded $\mathcal{D}$ -coalgebra is the ordinal over which the recursion is to hold.

Our axiom says **magically** that this exists.

For example, the $\mathcal{L} // E$ -extensional reflection of

$$\lambda n. \perp : (\mathbb{N}, \leq, <) \rightarrow E \quad \text{is} \quad \lambda n. s^n \perp.$$

Discrete opfibrations

The object $X_{(-)} : A \rightarrow E$ of $\mathbf{Pos} // E$ becomes $X \equiv \Sigma_a X_a \rightarrow A$.

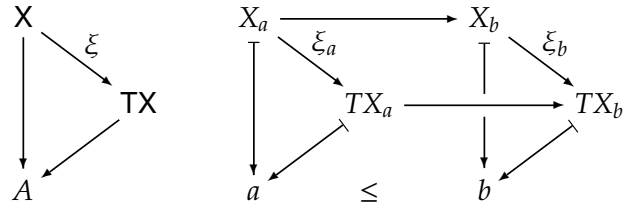
Lax slice morphisms become commutative squares, with a factorisation system like this:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} X & \xrightarrow{\quad} & U & \xrightarrow{\quad} & Y \\ \downarrow & & \downarrow & \lrcorner & \downarrow \\ A & \xrightarrow{e \in \mathcal{E}} & U & \xrightarrow{m \in \mathcal{M}} & B \end{array}$$

Pullbacks are constructed in the obvious way, as commutative cubes in which two faces are pullbacks.

Opfibre coalgebras

The functor $T : \mathbf{Set} \rightarrow \mathbf{Set}$ has opfibre coalgebras like this:



At first we just take A to be a poset, not a $\mathcal{D}$ -coalgebra or ordinal.

Well-foundedness and extensionality in the fibre over A are defined by a simple generalisation of the $\mathbf{Set}$ case or by treating this fibre as the presheaf topos $\mathbf{Set}^A$.

In this way we define the category (preorder) $\mathbf{Ens}^A$ of opfibre extensional well founded T -coalgebras over A .

Invoking the theory twice

We have just defined extensional well founded T -coalgebras in the fibre $\mathbf{Set}^A$.

Previously we constructed transfinite recursion using $\mathcal{R}$ - or $\mathcal{L}$ -extensional well founded $\mathcal{D}$ -coalgebras in the base category $\mathbf{Pos}$.

These are two separate invocations of the theory, with different functors and factorisation systems.

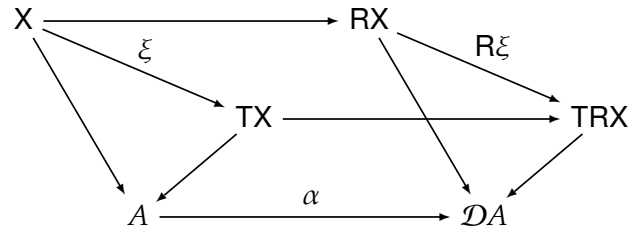
The simplifying assumption of just considering $T : \mathbf{Set} \rightarrow \mathbf{Set}$ means that the “monos” within the fibres are just plain ones.

Replacing $\mathbf{Set}$ with another category would just require an understanding of what its opfibre version is (over posets).

The final step is to combine these two parts.

Transfinite iteration of functors

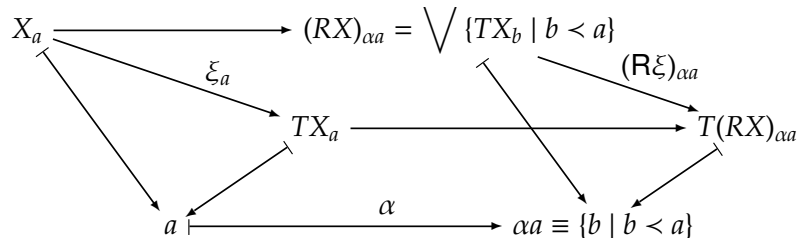
Adapting the construction in $\mathbf{Pos}/E$ we have



where

$$(RX)_U \equiv \bigvee_{\mathbf{Ens}} \{TX_b \mid b \in U\},$$

so that the fibres look like



Transfinite iteration of functors

We need to characterise pullbacks, well-foundedness and extensionality.

A morphism of opfibre coalgebras is a pullback iff its “underlying objects” form a pullback. (This does not require T to preserve inverse images.)

It is well founded iff the base morphism $\alpha : A \rightarrow \mathcal{D}A$ is well founded in $\mathbf{Pos}$.

It is extensional iff $\alpha \in \mathcal{M} \subset \mathbf{Pos}$ and the opfibre coalgebras form a pullback.

But that happens iff this encodes transfinite iteration:

$$X_a = (RX)_{aa} \equiv \bigvee_{\mathbf{Ens}} \{TX_b \mid b < a\}.$$

This exists magically using our proposed axiom!