

Document number: P2721R0
Date: 2024-02-14
Project: Programming Language C++
Audience: LEWG
Reply-to: Michael Florian Hava¹ <mfh.cpp@gmail.com>

Deprecating `function`

Abstract

This paper proposes deprecating `function` (and associated entities) as it has unresolvable API design issues and has recently been superseded by `copyable_function`.

Revisions

R0: Initial version

Motivation

C++11 added `function`, a type-erased function wrapper that can represent any *copyable* callable matching a given function signature. Since its introduction, there have been identified several issues with its design (see [N4159]) – including the famous constness-bug:

```
//the constness bug of std::function:  
  
//consider:  
auto lambda = [&]() mutable { ... };  
l(); ✓  
const auto & r{lambda};  
r(); ✗ //lambda::operator() is mutable => can't be called via const &!  
  
//but:  
function<void(void)> func{lambda};  
func(); ✓  
const auto & cref{func};  
cref(); ✓⚡ //func::operator() is const => can invoke mutable lambda through const &!  
// this breaks the fundamental guarantee that concurrently calling const member functions is safe!
```

As `function` was incompatible (and could not be made compatible) with *non-copyable* functors, [P0288] introduced `move_only_function`. The design of which not only drops the *copyable* requirement but also fixes bugs present in `function`, removes RTTI dependence and adds support for `const-`, `noexcept-` and `ref-qualifiers`.

Semi-concurrently [P0792] introduced `function_ref` as a non-owning reference to a functor. Like `move_only_function` it does not depend on RTTI and supports `const-` and `noexcept-qualifiers`².

After `move_only_function` was approved for C++23 and with `function_ref` targeting C++26, there were serious inconsistencies between the *polymorphic function wrappers* of the standard library. Whilst some of the new features³ could have been back-ported to `function`, it was impossible to reach feature parity without an API break. To improve the situation, [P2548] introduced `copyable_function` (design consistent with `move_only_function`) as a replacement of `function`.

¹ RISC Software GmbH, Softwarepark 32a, 4232 Hagenberg, Austria, michael.hava@risc-software.at

² There is no support for `ref-qualifiers` as `function_ref` itself is a reference type.

³ Primarily `noexcept-` and `ref-qualifier` support.

With the adoption of `copyable_function` for C++26 there remains little reason to keep `function` in the blessed part of the standard library. Furthermore it has been pointed out multiple times (both by [P3023] and externally) that the current state of *polymorphic function wrappers* in the standard library is complicated - growing from one to four distinct classes within two standard cycles. Deprecating `function` would lead to a more unified standard library design.

Why now? (Isn't it too soon?)

Going forward our message to users should be clear: "Avoid `function` for new code! Instead use the appropriate 'modern' *polymorphic function wrappers*." Deprecating `function` in the same standard cycle as the introduction of `copyable_function` will reduce confusion. Such timing is not entirely novel, it happened before in C++11 with the introduction of `unique_ptr` and the deprecation of `auto_ptr`.

Impact on the Standard

Several classes are moved to Annex D without a change in functionality.

Proposed Wording

Wording for the deprecation of `function` and ancillary entities will be provided in a future revision.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to RISC Software GmbH for supporting this work. Thanks to Zhihao Yuan for providing feedback on an initial draft. Thanks to Peter Kulczycki for proof reading R0.