Reductions, Self-Similarity, and Recursion

Relations between problems

Notes for CSC 100 - The Beauty and Joy of Computing
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Getting to places from my house...

Now I buy a new house!
Get anywhere by first going to old house

Things to notice...

I can go anywhere from my new house by
1. Going to my old house
2. Going to my destination from there

What I want to do...

What I know how to do...

Terminology: I have reduced the problem of traveling from my new house to the problem of traveling from my old house.

Important points:
- Solution is easy to produce (often easier than direct solution)
- Solution is easy and compact to describe
- Solution may not be the most efficient to execute
Things to notice...

I can go anywhere from my new house by
1. Going to my old house
2. Going to my destination from there

What I want to do...

What I know how to do...

Question: Is a reduction a property of problems or algorithms?

Things to notice...

I can go anywhere from my new house by
1. Going to my old house
2. Going to my destination from there

Problem

Reductions are between problems
- The reduction operation is an algorithm
- Abstraction: We don't care how the "known algorithm" works!

The Basics

A reduction is using the solution of one problem (problem A) to solve another problem (problem B).

We say "problem B is reduced to problem A".

Reductions are a fundamental "big idea" in computer science
- Lots of types of reductions - you could spend a lifetime studying this!
- Our reductions use a small amount of work in addition to a constant number of calls to problem A.
  - As a result, can say problem B is not much harder than problem A
  - True even if we don't know the most efficient way to solve problem A!
An example from Lab 4

To find least common multiple (LCM):

But if you already have GCD

What have we done? We have reduced the problem of computing LCM to the problem of computing GCD.

So: LCM is no harder computationally than GCD. And remember... Euler's algorithm is a very efficient GCD algorithm!
Similarity and Self-Similarity

Reducing LCM to GCD identifies similarities between the two problems.

Many problems are structured so that solutions are "self-similar" - large solutions contain solutions to smaller versions of the same problem!

Example: Recall sum of list items as parallel algorithm - each thread solved a smaller version of the same problem!

An algorithm can solve a large problem by breaking it down to smaller versions of the same problem - this is called recursion.

Example: Adding up a list

Sum of 20 items ( = 76)

7 2 3 1 5 4 3 2 5 8 8 3 5 3 2 2 4 2 1

Sum of 19 items ( = 75)

76

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Sum of 20 items ( = 76)

7 2 3 1 5 4 3 2 5 8 8 3 5 3 2 2 4 2 1

Sum of 19 items ( = 75)

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Breaking it down

**Base case**: Handling smallest case directly

**Recursive case**: Solving a smaller version of the same problem.

Constant amount of work to use answer from subproblem to compute answer to overall problem.

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**Workhorse Function**

**Driver Function**: sets up first call to recursion

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Another example: Sorting

"Selection sort" from algorithms lab:
Another example: Sorting

"Selection sort" from algorithms lab:

Recursive version:

Base case: One item - nothing to do!

Setting up recursion: Swap max item to last position

Recursion: Sort all the rest

Summary

Finding relations between problems can simplify solutions:

- Sometimes relations between different problems (reductions)
- Sometimes relation to smaller version of the same problem (recursion)

What you should know:

- Recognize reductions and recursion
- Understand the basic principles

We will explore this more in a lab!