
What Does Monad Mean?

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Abstract

This presentation is intended for the November 2009 meeting of the Brisbane Functional Programming Group <http://www.meetup.com/Brisbane-Functional-Programming-Group-BFG/>.

The *monad* concept will be presented to an audience with the assumption of knowledge of the generics concept of either the Java or C# programming languages or some other form of parametric polymorphism. The concept will be presented in a way with the objective of supplying enough understanding to apply the practical implications and will not address the underlying mathematics or category theory.

The monad concept has attracted much mysticism, misunderstanding and mythology, which will also be addressed.

Questions and comments should be forwarded to Tony Morris [mailto:code@tmorris.net] Appendix B, *Tony Morris - PGP Key*.

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Introduction

Moggi first described monads for use in structuring programs [MoggiMonads1988]. Philip Wadler and Simon Peyton-Jones have worked further with the concept on introducing them to purely functional programming languages.

It is often said that monads are specific to functional programming. This is not true. Indeed, the term “functional programming” is itself quite a misnomer. It's simply practical programming and the thesis is composition and abstraction (see [WhyFP]). Monads are used in every single programming language. The only distinction is whether or not the user is aware of the fact.

This presentation will set aside the myths and present you with a concrete understanding of a rather simple concept that is easy to understand, but with far reaching implications. If the objectives of this presentation are met, you will be equipped to take advantage of this concept in your every-day programming and explore those implications further.

Mythology

Debunking

Debunking popular myths is often fraught with controversy, fallacy and futility, so before we do that, let's have fun with a myth that is not so popular nor controversial.

Athena punished Medusa by turning her hair tresses into snakes. Perseus then used Medusa's head as a weapon in battles.

Once upon a time, this story was popularly believed despite its obvious absurdity. In our modern times, other stories are widely believed, again, despite absurdity. A few of those follow.

Monads are a hack for working with I/O in the real world

Other forms

- Monads are for impractical programming languages that try to be practical.
- Monads are for controlling side-effects.
- Without monads in \$language we cannot do I/O.

Demystify

Suppose a function that reverses a `List` and a class called `Banana` that your local fruit man has on his server.

```
<A> List<A> reverse(List<A> list)
class Banana {}
```

It is correct to say that we can reverse a list of bananas, but it is **incorrect** to say that the `reverse` function is in some way related to bananas. Reversing a list of bananas is merely a single instance of an infinite possibility. For precisely this reason, it is also incorrect to say that monads are in some way related to I/O.

This metaphor might appear vague or inaccurate, but it is actually very (very) precise as you will see.

Monads are only for functional or esoteric programming languages

Other forms

- I don't use monads in my Java (or .NET or Ruby or Groovy or Python or ...) enterprise.
- Monads are for others using other languages, not me and my language.

Demystify

- **FACT:** All programmers, knowingly or not, use monads at least 100 times per day. **I'll put a house on it.**
- Like many myths, it is highly likely that the claimant has either no or a very poor understanding of the monad concept and is spreading the myth simply by repetition.
- Monads are at least as common as semi-colons in language syntaxes such as Java.

Monads make my program impure

This myth is often related to or borne of those already mentioned. Interestingly, what the claimant is actually referring to (which is not monads, but controlling effects with types) makes programs pure, that would otherwise be impure.

Terminology

A quick note on terminology

Laws, type constructors, kinds and higher-order polymorphism.

Monad laws

What do we mean by the *Monad Laws*?

- You may have heard of the monad laws. There are three of them. They even have names!¹
- Lots of interfaces have laws that are not enforced by the compiler.
- You are all familiar with many of them.

¹ Associativity, Left Identity, Right Identity

For example

Example 1. An abbreviated `List` interface using Java

```
interface List<T> {  
    T get(int index);  
    int length();  
    List<T> reverse();  
}
```

- It can be said that any instance (`list`) must satisfy `list.get(list.length() - 1) == list.reverse().get(0)`
- There are other laws that are implicit in this abbreviated interface.
- All monad instances must satisfy three laws, but we won't go into them. Instead, just be aware of what we mean by the monad laws.

Type constructors and kinds

- In Java 1.5, `List` is not a type, because it requires a type variable ².
- `List<Long>` is a type, but `List` is a *type constructor*.
- `List` has a *kind* which is denoted `* -> *` and reads “takes one type to reveal a type”.
- `HashMap` is a type constructor which is kinded `(*, *) -> *` since it takes two type variables to reveal a type.
- `List<Long>` has a *kind* which is denoted `*` (i.e. it is a type).

Higher-order Polymorphism

- Languages such as Java and C# have *first-order polymorphism* because they allow us to abstract on types. e.g. `List<A>` can have a `reverse` function that works on any element type (the `A`).
- More practical programming languages and type systems³ allow us to abstract on *type constructors* as well.
- This feature is called higher-order (or higher-kinded) polymorphism.

²ignoring reverse compatibility where `List` is equivalent to `List<?>`

³Haskell, Scala, Clean (not F#)

So what is a Monad then?

It's a fluffy cloud



A monad is a fluffy cloud

Produced by a sonic boom



A monad is a cloud produced by the condensation of the sonic boom of a supersonic aircraft

Monad metaphors are stupid

Yeah OK, so monad metaphors are stupid and divertive.

Metaphors are training wheels that obscure learning opportunities and stall progress (object-oriented programming anyone?).

Let's get to the nuts of it.

First let's pretend that Java/C# are practical

Example 2. Pseudo-Java with an invented notation for higher-order polymorphism⁴

```
interface Transformer<X, Y> {
    Y transform(X x);
}

interface Monad<M> { // M :: * -> *
    <A> M<A> pure(A a);
    <A, B> M<B> bind(Transformer<A, M<B>> t, M<A> a);
}
```

Finished staring?

A monad is any instance of that interface⁵. That is all it is.

Example 3. The List monad

```
new Monad<List>() { // List :: * -> * (kind checks)
    public <A> List<A> pure(A a) {
        return List.single(a);
    }

    public <A, B> List<B> bind(Transformer<A, List<B>> t, List<A> a) {
        List<B> r = List.empty();
        for(e : a) r.addAll(t.transform(e));
        return r;
    }
};
```

Monads and more monads

In fact, there are lots of possible instances of the Monad interface. Even Transformer with one type variable applied is a monad.

⁴ or C# with a slight syntax change

⁵ and also satisfies the three monad laws

Example 4. The Transformer<X, _> monad

```

new Monad<Transformer<X, _>>() {
  public <A> Transformer<X, A> pure(A a) {
    return new Transformer<X, A>() {
      public A transform(X x) { return a; }
    };
  }

  public <A, B> Transformer<X, B> bind(
    Transformer<A, Transformer<X, B>> t, Transformer<X, A> a) {
    return new Transformer<X, B>() {
      public B transform(X x) { return
        t.transform(a.transform(x)).transform(x); }
    };
  }
};

```

More examples**Example 5. A value is a monad⁶**

```

interface Value<T> {
  T value();
}

new Monad<Value>() {
  public <A> Value<A> pure(A a) {
    return new Value<A>() { public A value() { return a; } };
  }

  public <A, B> Value<B> bind(Transformer<A, Value<B>> t, Value<A> a) {
    return t.transform(a.value());
  }
};

```

Other examples include

- Nullable values
- Chaining exceptions
- Disjoint union
- Continuations
- Functions
- State
- Parsers
- Side-effects (!!!)

⁶more correctly called The Identity Monad

So what, why do I care?

Repetition is for solving non-problems using clumsy languages

We can write functions that abstract on the type constructor and needn't be repeated. Similar to a `sort` function that accepts any value that has declared itself the ability to compare, these functions can act on any type constructor that has declared itself a monad.

- `<A> M<List<A>> sequence(List<M<A>> list)`
- `<A> M<List<A>> replicate(int n, M<A> a)`
- `<A> M<A> join(M<M<A>> a)`
- *etc. etc.*

And it's not just monads

We can do this because we have *higher-order polymorphism*. We can also generalise applicative functors, comonads, arrows, covariant and contravariant functors, binary covariant functors, structure traversal and many other concepts that are well documented in the literature.

Monads get far more attention than they deserve!

C#, LINQ Query Comprehensions and Monads

C# 3.0

- Microsoft introduced LINQ query comprehensions into C# version 3.0.
- Many people are mistaken in believing LINQ is about enumerable data structures or SQL queries.
- These are just monad instances! LINQ query comprehensions are syntactic sugar for working with *any* monad.
- What we have called `bind`, C#/LINQ calls `SelectMany` and what we have called `Transformer`, C# calls `Func`. C# also introduces syntactic sugar for instantiating `Func`.

Syntax sugar

`x => method(x)` is syntax sugar for a `Func` instance that takes a variable (`x`) and runs `method` on it.

Example 6. LINQ Query Comprehension ⁷

```
from i in a
from j in b
from k in c
select foo(i, j, k);
```

⁷ `from`, `in`, and `select` are keywords.

Example 7. Without the syntax sugar

```
a.SelectMany(i =>
b.SelectMany(j =>
c.Select(k =>
foo(i, j, k)))));
```

LINQ

In the previous examples, the query comprehension can work on *any monad*. Types declare their monad simply by implementing the `SelectMany` (and `Select`) method.

Notice that a general LINQ query comprehension cannot have a type since it would require higher-order polymorphism. Consequently, we cannot write functions to run on any monad.

C# is catching up to practical languages (unlike Java), but still has an awful long way to go!

Scala for-comprehensions and Monads**Scala**

- Scala has had for-comprehensions from the beginning, but not always higher-kinded polymorphism⁸.
- What C# calls `SelectMany` and we have called `bind`, Scala calls `flatMap`.
- Like LINQ, for-comprehensions provide syntactic sugar for calls to `flatMap` (and others) and also like LINQ are not type-safe⁹.

For-comprehensions**Example 8. Scala for-comprehension**¹⁰

```
for(i <- a;
    j <- b;
    k <- c)
yield foo(i, j, k)
```

Example 9. Without syntax sugar

```
a flatMap (i =>
b flatMap (j =>
c map (k =>
foo(i, j, k))))
```

Transforming side-effects using monads**Suppose a program in a typical language**

⁸ Scala By Example (DRAFT October 28, 2009) still incorrectly states that Scala's type system is too weak to express the generalisation.

⁹ This is because of historical reasons, unlike C#/LINQ, which is due to type system limitations.

¹⁰ `for` and `yield` are keywords.

```
T t = e1();
e2(t);
U u = e3(t);
V v = e4(t, u);
return e5(u, v);
```

We are going to change some of the syntax rules.

Change the syntax

- Remove type-annotations.
- Swap the left/right of an assignment.
- `void` methods will return a value that is ignored (let's call it `_`).

```
e1() = t;
e2(t) = _;
e3(t) = u;
e4(t, u) = v;
return e5(u, v);
```

More changes

- Replace semi-colons with `=>`.
- Replace `return` with `pure`.
- Replace `=` with `flatMap`.

Example 10. Zing!

```
e1() flatMap t =>
e2(t) flatMap _ =>
e3(t) flatMap u =>
e4(t, u) flatMap v =>
pure e5(u, v);
```

More fun

- Applicative functors [<http://www soi.city.ac.uk/~ross/papers/Applicative.pdf>]
- Arrows [<http://www.cs.chalmers.se/~rjmh/afp-arrows.pdf>]
- Structure traversal (iteration) [<http://www.comlab.ox.ac.uk/jeremy.gibbons/publications/iterator.pdf>]
- Questions?

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Bibliography

[MoggiMonads1988] Eugenio Moggi . 1988 . *Computational lambda-calculus and monads* .

[WhyFP] John Hughes . 1984 . *Why Functional Programming Matters* .

A. Code Examples

Scala

```
Monad.scala

// Monad interface
trait Monad[M[_]] {
  def pure[A](a: A): M[A]
  def bind[A, B](a: M[A], f: A => M[B]): M[B]
}

object Monad {
  // Monad instances
  val ValueMonad = new Monad[Function0] {
    def pure[A](a: A) = () => a
    def bind[A, B](a: Function0[A], f: A => Function0[B]) =
      f(a.apply)
  }

  val ListMonad = new Monad[List] {
    def pure[A](a: A) = List(a)
    def bind[A, B](a: List[A], f: A => List[B]) =
      a flatMap f
  }

  val OptionMonad = new Monad[Option] {
    def pure[A](a: A) = Some(a)
    def bind[A, B](a: Option[A], f: A => Option[B]) =
      a flatMap f
  }

  trait PA[T[_], A] {
    type Apply[B] = T[A, B]
  }

  def Function1Monad[X] = new Monad[PA[Function1, X]#Apply] {
    def pure[A](a: A) = _ => a
    def bind[A, B](a: X => A, f: A => X => B) =
      x => f(a(x))(x)
  }

  // Monad functions
  def sequence[M[_], A](as: List[M[A]], m: Monad[M]) =
    as.foldRight[M[List[A]]](m pure Nil)((h, t) =>
      m.bind(h, (a: A) => m.bind(t, (as: List[A]) => m pure (a :: as))))
}
```

```

def join[M[_], A](a: M[M[A]], m: Monad[M]) = m.bind(a, (z: M[A]) => z)

def replicate[M[_], A](n: Int, a: M[A], m: Monad[M]) =
  sequence(List.fill(n)(a), m)

// etc. etc. (Monad functions)
}

// Monad demo
object Main {
  import Monad._

  def main(args: Array[String]) {
    println(sequence(List(List(1, 2, 3), List(4, 5, 6)), ListMonad))
    println(sequence(List(Some(7), Some(8)), OptionMonad))
    println(join(List(List(1, 2, 3), List(4, 5, 6)), ListMonad))
    println(join(Some(Some(7)), OptionMonad))
    println(replicate(3, "abc".toList, ListMonad) map (_.mkString))
    println(replicate(4, Some(8), OptionMonad))
  }
}

// scala-2.8.0.r19410-b20091106023416

/*
List(List(1, 4), List(1, 5), List(1, 6), List(2, 4), List(2, 5),
  List(2, 6), List(3, 4), List(3, 5), List(3, 6))
Some(List(7, 8))
List(1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
Some(7)
List(aaa, aab, aac, aba, abb, abc, aca, acb, acc, baa,
  bab, bac, bba, bbb, bbc, bca, bcb, bcc, caa, cab, cac,
  cba, cbb, cbc, cca, ccb, ccc)
Some(List(8, 8, 8, 8))
*/

```

C#

Monad.cs

```

using System;
using System.Collections.Generic;
using System.Linq;

static class MonadFunctions {
  public static IEnumerable<A> joinEnumerable<A>(IEnumerable<IEnumerable<A>> a) {
    // Forced repetition.
    return a.SelectMany(z => z);
  }

  public static IQueryable<A> joinQueryable<A>(IQueryable<IQueryable<A>> a) {
    // Repeats for each type constructor.
    return a.SelectMany(z => z);
  }

  // join*
}

```

```
class M {
    public static void Main(string[] args) {
        var i = new[]{1, 2, 3};
        var j = new[]{4, 5, 6};
        Print(MonadFunctions.joinEnumerable(new[]{i as IEnumerable<int>, j}));
    }

    static void Print<A>(IEnumerable<A> a) {
        foreach(A i in a)
            Console.WriteLine("{0} ", i);
    }
}
```

Haskell

Monad.hs

```
-- Monad interface
class Monad' m where
    bind :: m a -> (a -> m b) -> m b
    pure :: a -> m a

newtype Value a = Value {
    val :: a
}

-- Monad instances
instance Monad' Value where
    bind (Value a) f = f a
    pure = Value

instance Monad' [] where -- aka List
    bind = (>>=)
    pure = return

instance Monad' Maybe where -- aka Option
    bind = (>>=)
    pure = return

instance Monad' ((->) t) where -- aka Function1
    bind a f = \x -> f (a x) x
    pure = const

-- Monad functions
sequence' :: (Monad' m) => [m a] -> m [a]
sequence' = foldr (\h t -> bind h (bind t . (pure .) . (:))) (pure [])

join' :: (Monad' m) => m (m a) -> m a
join' a = bind a id

replicate' :: (Monad m) => Int -> m a -> m [a]
replicate' n a = sequence (replicate n a)

-- etc. etc. Monad functions

main = do print (sequence' [[1, 2, 3], [4, 5, 6]])
```

```
print (sequence' [Just 7, Just 8])
print (join' [[1, 2, 3], [4, 5, 6]])
print (join' (Just (Just 7)))
print (replicate' 3 "abc")
print (replicate' 4 (Just 8))
```

```
{-
[[1,4],[1,5],[1,6],[2,4],[2,5],[2,6],[3,4],[3,5],[3,6]]
Just [7,8]
[1,2,3,4,5,6]
Just 7
["aaa","aab","aac","aba","abb","abc","aca","acb","acc","baa",
 "bab","bac","bba","bbb","bbc","bca","bcb","bcc","caa","cab","cac",
 "cba","cbb","cbc","cca","ccb","ccc"]
Just [8,8,8,8]
-}
```

B. Tony Morris - PGP Key

```
-----BEGIN PGP PUBLIC KEY BLOCK-----
Version: GnuPG v1.4.6 (GNU/Linux)
```

```
mQGIBETNyC0RBAC3MYSZSbdZhbLKra2YUphB9006+qMFl/v2Lq8590ZfeE2WjIOu
c/KGKyOigXztMrA4+iekUjM4FA8E6AlBRQiAqZK8HF0ftX5hDpuSyEKkZe3jcxxI
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BwMCBBUCCAMEFgIDAQIeAQIXgAAKCRCaemCth7qvrF0pAKCFii2pI2WlBKVFuQcw
yoNxP0CAUACgyhuI9isCvtrOkeyjDmCVueRCdaC5Ag0ERM3IThAIAJ6Alz+d40ve
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Er8uyONV4DqF6RbLj4w+iA6zn93+PTEZ73ydhxF6vDuojpVZPXVzXzpgyXHkEVLc
3hKL9oVlEsh+DWCvCiSAIy780JZ3FNvUMC3VH4qKxTw0CwPuuZvVfnMoIRfPODRR
fVEk2VDor+lr8kqJkBaHgN5o/AvOXC7QCYadwbEkpr0ecxIZ1VcASYytIIM3YNL7
ZcHWwU5PCNL0dMPqOdthhDhsHkKJNEXXr0YsjX/bQqYOUqYKPDyqh/yrR09Ro6
7eTSbfIguycAAwch/2waLIQR8qYKxPknNuSdsOOqF2jf2gg1L/7uMsIzjfkFzgho
+GNHw9tmlZqD3yzaZ/N7Yv08ujRHmWPBYAWRiCBM3qo0zMJ9ki5XWRobeRQpLtf
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MlEmfgL42yDK0hnokmW2i9y1RBh/T1VQQeQbUaeITAQYEQIADAUCRM3ITgUJCWYB
gAAKCRCaemCth7qvrCbTAJ9j3C6lKNRB3uKcrfze66jAVQh0qACaAysOK82TcQ/2
73ryR0xWMFnpGqg=
=bMTb
-----END PGP PUBLIC KEY BLOCK-----
```

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