Errors, Logs and Debugging in *BiocParallel*

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Edited: December 16, 2015; Compiled: April 7, 2017

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**1 Introduction**

This vignette is part of the *BiocParallel* package and focuses on error handling and logging. A section at the end demonstrates how the two can be used together as part of an effective debugging routine.

*BiocParallel* provides a unified interface to the parallel infrastructure in several packages including *snow*, *parallel*, *BatchJobs* and *foreach*. When implementing error handling in *BiocParallel* the primary goals were to enable the return of partial results when an error is thrown (vs just the error) and to establish logging on the workers. In cases where error handling existed, such as *BatchJobs* and *foreach*, those behaviors were preserved. Clusters created with *snow* and *parallel* now have flexible error handling and logging available through `SnowParam` and `MulticoreParam` objects.

In this document the term “job” is used to describe a single call to a bp*apply function (e.g., the X in `bplapply`). A “job” consists of one or more “tasks”, where each “task” is run separately on a worker.

The *BiocParallel* package is available at bioconductor.org and can be downloaded via biocLite:

```
source("http://bioconductor.org/biocLite.R")
bioCLite("BiocParallel")
```

Load the package:
library(BiocParallel)

## 2 Error Handling

### 2.1 Catching errors

By default, `BiocParallel` attempts all computations and returns any warnings and errors along with successful results. The `stop.on.error` field controls if the job is terminated as soon as one task throws an error. This is useful when debugging or when running large jobs (many tasks) and you want to be notified of an error before all runs complete.

`stop.on.error` is `TRUE` by default.

```r
param <- SnowParam()
param
## class: SnowParam
## bpisup: FALSE; bpnworkers: 4; bptasks: 0; bpjobname: BPJOB
## bplog: FALSE; bpthreshold: INFO; bpstopOnError: TRUE
## bptimeout: 2592000; bpprogressbar: FALSE
## bpRNGseed:
## bplogdir: NA
## bpresultdir: NA
## cluster type: SOCK

The field can be set when constructing the param or modified with the `bpstopOnError` accessor.

```r
drop = TRUE)
res
```
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```r
## <bplist_error: BiocParallel errors
## element index: 2
## first error: non-numeric argument to mathematical function>
## results and errors available as 'attr(x, "result")'

attr(res, "result")
## [[1]]
## [1] 1
##
## [[2]]
## <remote_error in FUN(...): non-numeric argument to mathematical function>
## traceback() available as 'attr(x, "traceback")'
##
## [[3]]
## [1] 1.732051
##
## [[4]]
## [1] 2
##
## [[5]]
## [1] 2.236068

Using \texttt{stop.on.error=FALSE}, all tasks are evaluated.

X <- list("1", 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
param <- SnowParam(3, tasks = length(X), stop.on.error = FALSE)
res <- tryCatch({
  bplapply(X, sqrt, BPPARAM = param)
}, error=identity)
res
## <bplist_error: BiocParallel errors
## element index: 1
## first error: non-numeric argument to mathematical function>
## results and errors available as 'attr(x, "result")'

attr(res, "result")
## [[1]]
## <remote_error in FUN(...): non-numeric argument to mathematical function>
## traceback() available as 'attr(x, "traceback")'
##
## [[2]]
## [1] 1.414214
##
## [[3]]
## [1] 1.732051
##
## [[4]]
## [1] 2
##
## [[5]]
## [1] 2.236068
##
## [[6]]
## [1] 2.44949
```
bptry() is a convenient way of trying to evaluate a bpapply-like expression, returning the evaluated results without signalling an error.

```r
bptry(
  bpapply(X, sqrt, BPPARAM=param)
)
```

```r
## [[1]]
## [1] 1.414214
##
## [[2]]
## [1] 1.732051
##
## [[3]]
## [1] 2
##
## [[4]]
## [1] 2.236068
##
## [[5]]
## [1] 2.44949
##
## [[6]]
## [1] 2.44949
```

In the next example the elements of X are grouped instead of run separately. The default value for tasks is 0 which means ‘X’ is split as evenly as possible across the number of workers. There are 3 workers so the first task consists of list(1, 2), the second is list("3", 4) and the third is list(5, 6).

```r
X <- list(1, 2, "3", 4, 5, 6)
param <- SnowParam(3, stop.on.error = TRUE)
```

The output shows an error in when evaluating the third element, but also that the fourth element, in the same chunk as 3, was not evaluated. All elements are evaluated because they were assigned to workers before the first error occurred.

```r
bptry(bplapply(X, sqrt, BPPARAM = param))
```

```r
## [[1]]
## [1] 1
##
## [[2]]
## [1] 1.414214
##
## [[3]]
##<remote_error in FUN(...): non-numeric argument to mathematical function>
## traceback() available as 'attr(x, "traceback")'
##
## [[4]]
##<unevaluated_error: not evaluated due to previous error>
##
## [[5]]
## [1] 2.236068
##
## [[6]]
## [1] 2.44949
```
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Side Note: Results are collected from workers as they finish which is not necessarily the same order in which they were loaded. Depending on how tasks are divided it is possible that the task with the error completes after all others so essentially all workers complete before the job is stopped. In this situation the output includes all results along with the error message and it may appear that `stop.on.error=TRUE` did not stop the job soon enough. This is just a heads up that the usefulness of `stop.on.error=TRUE` may vary with run time and distribution of tasks over workers.

### 2.2 Identify failures with `bpok()`

The `bpok()` function is a quick way to determine which (if any) tasks failed. In this example we use `bptry()` to retrieve the partially evaluated expression, including the failed elements.

```r
param <- SnowParam(2, stop.on.error=FALSE)
result <- bptry(bplapply(list(1, "2", 3), sqrt, BPPARAM=param))

bpok(result)
```

bpok returns TRUE if the task was successful.

```r
## [1] TRUE FALSE TRUE
```

Once errors are identified with `bpok` the traceback can be retrieved with the `attr` function. This is possible because errors are returned as condition objects with the traceback as an attribute.

```r
tail(attr(result[[which(!bpok(result))]], "traceback"))
```

### 2.3 Rerun failed tasks with `BPREDO`

Tasks can fail due to hardware problems or bugs in the input data. The *BiocParallel* functions support a `BPREDO` (re-do) argument for recomputing only the tasks that failed. A list of partial results and errors is supplied to `BPREDO` in a second call to the function. The failed elements are identified, recomputed and inserted into the original results.

The bug in this example is the second element of ‘X’ which is a character when it should be numeric.

```r
X <- list(1, "2", 3)
param <- SnowParam(2, stop.on.error=FALSE)
result <- bptry(bplapply(X, sqrt, BPPARAM=param))
result
```

First fix the input data.
X.redo <- list(1, 2, 3)

Repeat the call to `bplapply` this time supplying the partial results as `BPRED0`. Only the failed calculations are computed, in the present case requiring only one worker.

```r
bplapply(X.redo, sqrt, BPRED0=result, BPPARAM=param)
## resuming previous calculation ...  
## [[1]]
## [1] 1  
## [[2]]
## [1] 1.414214  
## [[3]]
## [1] 1.732051
```

### 3 Logging

NOTE: Logging as described in this section is supported for SnowParam, MulticoreParam and SerialParam.

#### 3.1 Parameters

Logging in `BiocParallel` is controlled by 3 fields in the `BiocParallelParam`:

- `log`: TRUE or FALSE
- `logdir`: location to write log file
- `threshold`: one of "TRACE", "DEBUG", "INFO", "WARN", "ERROR", "FATAL"

When `log = TRUE` the `futile.logger` package is loaded on each worker. `BiocParallel` uses a custom script on the workers to collect log messages as well as additional statistics such as gc, runtime and node information. Output to stderr and stdout is also captured.

By default `log` is FALSE and `threshold` is `INFO`.

```r
param <- SnowParam(stop.on.error=FALSE)
param
## class: SnowParam
## bpisup: FALSE; bpnworkers: 4; bptasks: 0; bpjobname: BPJOB
## bplog: FALSE; bpthreshold: INFO; bpstopOnError: FALSE
## bptimeout: 2592000; bpprogressbar: FALSE
## bpRNGseed:  
## bplogdir: NA  
## bpresultdir: NA  
## cluster type: SOCK
```

Turn logging on and set the threshold to `TRACE`.

```r
bplog(param) <- TRUE
bpthreshold(param) <- "TRACE"
param
## class: SnowParam
## bpisup: FALSE; bpnworkers: 4; bptasks: 0; bpjobname: BPJOB
```
3.2 Setting a threshold

All thresholds defined in `futile.logger` are supported: `FATAL`, `ERROR`, `WARN`, `INFO`, `DEBUG` and `TRACE`. All messages greater than or equal to the severity of the threshold are shown. For example, a threshold of `INFO` will print all messages tagged as `FATAL`, `ERROR`, `WARN` and `INFO`.

Because the default threshold is `INFO` it catches the `ERROR`-level message thrown when attempting the square root of a character ("2").

```r
tryCatch(
  bplapply(list(1, "2", 3), sqrt, BPPARAM = param)
), error=function(e) invisible(e))
```

```
## Task: 2
## Node: 2
## Timestamp: 2017-04-07 19:15:07
## Success: FALSE
## Task duration:
## user system elapsed
## 0.004 0.000 0.004
## Memory used:
## used (Mb) gc trigger (Mb) max used (Mb)
## Ncells 383577 20.5 750400 40.1 592000 31.7
## Vcells 588807 4.5 1308461 10.0 818353 6.3
## Log messages:
## ERROR [2017-04-07 19:15:07] non-numeric argument to mathematical function
## stderr and stdout:
## character(0)
```

```
## Task: 1
## Node: 1
## Timestamp: 2017-04-07 19:15:07
## Success: TRUE
## Task duration:
## user system elapsed
## 0 0 0
## Memory used:
## used (Mb) gc trigger (Mb) max used (Mb)
```
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```r
## Ncells 382407 20.5 750400 40.1 592000 31.7
## Vcells 588492 4.5 1308461 10.0 818353 6.3

## Log messages:
#
## stderr and stdout:
## character(0)
## ############### LOG OUTPUT ###############
## Task: 3
## Node: 3
## Timestamp: 2017-04-07 19:15:07
## Success: TRUE
## Task duration:
## user system elapsed
## 0 0 0
## Memory used:
## used (Mb) gc trigger (Mb) max used (Mb)
## Ncells 382485 20.5 750400 40.1 592000 31.7
## Vcells 588579 4.5 1308461 10.0 818353 6.3

## Log messages:
#
## stderr and stdout:
## character(0)
```

All user-supplied messages written in the `futile.logger` syntax are also captured. This function performs argument checking and includes a couple of `WARN` and `DEBUG`-level messages.

```r
FUN <- function(i) {
  futile.logger::flog.debug(paste("value of 'i':", i))

  if (!length(i)) {
    futile.logger::flog.warn("'i' has length 0")
    NA
  } else if (!is(i, "numeric")) {
    futile.logger::flog.debug("coercing 'i' to numeric")
    as.numeric(i)
  } else {
    i
  }
}
```

Turn logging on and set the threshold to `WARN`.

```r
param <- SnowParam(2, log = TRUE, threshold = "WARN", stop.on.error=FALSE)
result <- bplapply(list(1, "2", integer()), FUN, BPPARAM = param)

## ############### LOG OUTPUT ###############
## Task: 1
## Node: 1
```
Changing the threshold to `DEBUG` catches both `WARN` and `DEBUG` messages.

```r
catch <- SnowParam(2, log = TRUE, threshold = "DEBUG", stop.on.error=FALSE)
result <- bplapply(list(1, "2", integer()), FUN, BPPARAM = catch)
```

```r
# [1] 1 2 NA
```
## 3.3 Log files

When `log == TRUE`, log messages are written to the console by default. If `logdir` is given the output is written out to files, one per task. File names are prefixed with the name in `bpjobname(BPPARAM)`; default is 'BPJOB'.

```r
param <- SnowParam(2, log = TRUE, threshold = "DEBUG", logdir = tempdir())
res <- bplapply(list(1, "2", integer()), FUN, BPPARAM = param)
## loading futile.logger on workers
list.files(bplogdir(param))
## [1] "BPJOB.task1.log" "BPJOB.task2.log"

Read in BPJOB.task2.log:

readLines(paste0(bplogdir(param), "/BPJOB.task2.log"))
```
## LOG OUTPUT

### Task: 2
### Node: 2
### Timestamp: 2015-07-08 09:03:59
### Success: TRUE
### Task duration: 0.009 user 0.000 system 0.011 elapsed
### Memory use (gc):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ncells</th>
<th>Vcells</th>
<th>used (Mb)</th>
<th>gc trigger (Mb)</th>
<th>max used (Mb)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>325664</td>
<td>436181</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>592000</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1023718</td>
<td>593522</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Log messages:

- DEBUG [2015-07-08 09:03:59] value of 'i': 2
- INFO [2015-07-08 09:03:59] coercing to numeric
- DEBUG [2015-07-08 09:03:59] value of 'i': 
- WARN [2015-07-08 09:03:59] 'i' is missing

### stderr and stdout:

- character(0)

---

### 4 Worker timeout

**NOTE:** timeout is supported for SnowParam and MulticoreParam.

For long running jobs or untested code it can be useful to set a time limit. The timeout field is the time, in seconds, allowed for each worker to complete a task; default is Inf. If the task takes longer than timeout a timeout error is returned.

Time can be changed during param construction with the timeout arg,

```r
param <- SnowParam(timeout = 20, stop.on.error=FALSE)
```

or with the bptimeout setter:

```r
param <- SnowParam(timeout = 2, stop.on.error=FALSE)
fun <- function(i) {
  Sys.sleep(i)
  i
}
bptry(bplapply(1:3, fun, BPPARAM = param))
```

## [1] 1
Debugging

Effective debugging strategies vary by problem and often involve a combination of error handling and logging techniques. In general, when debugging R-generated errors the traceback is often the best place to start followed by adding debug messages to the worker function. When troubleshooting unexpected behavior (i.e., not a formal error or warning) adding debug messages or switching to SerialParam are good approaches. Below is an overview of these different strategies.

5.1 Accessing the traceback

The traceback is a good place to start when tracking down R-generated errors. Because the function is executed on the workers it’s not accessible for interactive debugging with functions such as trace or debug. The traceback provides a snapshot of the state of the worker at the time the error was thrown.

This function takes the square root of the absolute value of a vector.

```r
fun1 <- function(x) {
  v <- abs(x)
  sapply(1:length(v), function(i) sqrt(v[i]))
}
```

Calling “fun1” with a character throws an error:

```r
param <- SnowParam(stop.on.error=FALSE)
result <- bptry(
  bplapply(list(c(1,3), 5, "6"), fun1, BPPARAM = param)
), error=identity)
result
```

```
## [[1]]
## [1] 1.000000 1.732051
##
## [[2]]
## [1] 2.236068
##
## [[3]]
## <remote_error in abs(x): non-numeric argument to mathematical function>
## traceback() available as 'attr(x, "traceback")'
```

Identify which elements failed with bpok:

```r
bpok(result)
```

```
## [1] TRUE TRUE FALSE
```

The error (i.e., third element of “res”) is a condition object:
is(result[[3]], "condition")

## [1] TRUE

The traceback is an attribute of the condition and can be accessed with the attr function.

noquote(tail(attr(result[[3]], "traceback")))

## [1] call <- sapply(sys.calls(), deparse)
## [2] e <- structure(e, class = c("remote_error", "condition"), traceback = capture.output(traceback(call)))
## [3] invokeRestart("abort", e)
## [5] }, "non-numeric argument to mathematical function", quote(abs(x)))
## [6] 1: h(simpleError(msg, call))

5.2 Adding debug messages

When a numeric() is passed to “fun1” no formal error is thrown but the length of the second list element is 2 when it should be 1.

bplapply(list(c(1,3), numeric(), 6), fun1, BPPARAM = param)

## [[1]]
## [1] 1.000000 1.732051
##
## [[2]]
## [[2]][[1]]
## [1] NA
##
## [[2]][[2]]
## numeric(0)
##
## [[3]]
## [1] 2.44949

Without a formal error we have no traceback so we'll add a few debug messages. The futile.logger syntax tags messages with different levels of severity. A message created with flog.debug will only print if the threshold is DEBUG or lower. So in this case it will catch both INFO and DEBUG messages.

“fun2” has debug statements that show the value of ‘x’, length of ‘v’ and the index ‘i’.

fun2 <- function(x)
{
v <- abs(x)
futile.logger::flog.debug(
  paste0("'x' = ", paste(x, collapse=""), ": length(v) = ", length(v))
)
sapply(1:length(v), function(i) {
  futile.logger::flog.info(paste0("'i' = ", i))
sqrt(v[i])
})
}

Create a param that logs at a threshold level of DEBUG.

param <- SnowParam(3, log = TRUE, threshold = "DEBUG")
The debug messages reveal the problem occurs when 'x' is numeric(). The index for sapply is along 'v' which in this case has length 0. This forces 'i' to take values of '1' and '0' giving an output of length 2 for the second element (i.e., NA and numeric(0)).

```r
res <- bplapply(list(c(1,3), numeric(), 6), fun2, BPPARAM = param)
```

```
## Task: 2
## Node: 2
## Timestamp: 2017-04-07 19:15:15
## Success: TRUE
## Task duration:
## user system elapsed
## 0.008 0.000 0.009
## Memory used:
## used (Mb) gc trigger (Mb) max used (Mb)
## Ncells 383266 20.5 750400 40.1
## Vcells 593287 4.6 1308461 10.0
## Log messages:
## DEBUG [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'x' = : length(v) = 0
## INFO [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'i' = 1
## INFO [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'i' = 0
## stderr and stdout:
## character(0)
```

```
## Task: 1
## Node: 1
## Timestamp: 2017-04-07 19:15:15
## Success: TRUE
## Task duration:
## user system elapsed
## 0.012 0.000 0.013
## Memory used:
## used (Mb) gc trigger (Mb) max used (Mb)
## Ncells 382874 20.5 750400 40.1
## Vcells 593171 4.6 1308461 10.0
## Log messages:
## DEBUG [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'x' = 1,3: length(v) = 2
## INFO [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'i' = 1
## INFO [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'i' = 2
## stderr and stdout:
## character(0)
```

```
## Task: 3
```
## Node: 3  
## Timestamp: 2017-04-07 19:15:15  
## Success: TRUE  
## Task duration:  
## user system elapsed  
## 0.008 0.000 0.009  
## Memory used:  
## used (Mb) gc trigger (Mb) max used (Mb)  
## Ncells 382952 20.5 750400 40.1 750400 40.1  
## Vcells 593264 4.6 1308461 10.0 826754 6.4  
## Log messages:  
## DEBUG [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'x' = 6: length(v) = 1  
## INFO [2017-04-07 19:15:15] 'i' = 1  
## stderr and stdout:  
## character(0)  

res  
## [[1]]  
## [1] 1.000000 1.732051  
## ## [[2]]  
## [[2]][[1]]  
## [1] NA  
## ## [[2]][[2]]  
## numeric(0)  
## ## [3][[1]]  
## [1] 2.44949  

"fun2" can be fixed by using seq_along(v) to create the index instead of 1:length(v).

### 5.3 Local debugging with SerialParam

Errors that occur on parallel workers can be difficult to debug. Often the traceback sent back from the workers is too much to parse or not informative. We are also limited in that our interactive strategies of browser and trace are not available.

One option for further debugging is to run the code in serial with SerialParam. This removes the “parallel” component and is the same as running a straight *apply function. This approach may not help if the problem was hardware related but can be very useful when the bug is in the R code.

We use the now familiar square root example with a bug in the second element of X.

```r
res <- bptry(
  bplapply(list(1, "2", 3), sqrt, 
  BPPARAM = SnowParam(3, stop.on.error=FALSE))
)
result
```
sqrt is an internal function. The problem is likely with our data going into the function and not the sqrt function itself. We can write a small wrapper around sqrt so we can see the input.

```r
fun3 <- function(i) sqrt(i)
```

Debug the new function:

```r
debug(fun3)
```

We want to recompute only elements that failed and for that we use the BPRED0 argument. The BPPARAM has been changed to SerialParam so the job is run in the local workspace in serial.

```r
> bplapply(list(1, "2", 3), fun3, BPRED0 = result, BPPARAM = SerialParam())
Resuming previous calculation ...
debugging in: FUN(...)
debug: sqrt(i)
Browse[2]> objects()
[1] "i"
Browse[2]> i
[1] "2"
Browse[2]>
```

The local browsing allowed us to see the problem input was the character "2".

### sessionInfo()

```r
toLatex(sessionInfo())
```

- R version 3.3.3 (2017-03-06), x86_64-pc-linux-gnu
- Locale: LC_CTYPE=en_US.UTF-8, LC_NUMERIC=C, LC_TIME=en_US.UTF-8, LC_COLLATE=C, LC_MONETARY=en_US.UTF-8, LC_MESSAGES=en_US.UTF-8, LC_PAPER=en_US.UTF-8, LC_NAME=C, LC_ADDRESS=C, LC_TELEPHONE=C, LC_MEASUREMENT=en_US.UTF-8, LC_IDENTIFICATION=C
- Base packages: base, datasets, grDevices, graphics, methods, stats, utils
- Other packages: BiocParallel 1.8.2
- Loaded via a namespace (and not attached): BiocStyle 2.2.1, evaluate 0.10, highr 0.6, knitr 1.15.1, magrittr 1.5, parallel 3.3.3, snow 0.4-2, stringi 1.1.3, stringr 1.2.0, tools 3.3.3