CS234: Reinforcement Learning – Problem Session #1

Winter 2022-2023

Problem 1

Consider an infinite-horizon, discounted MDP $\mathcal{M} = \langle \mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{R}, \mathcal{T}, \gamma \rangle$. As usual, for any policy $\pi : \mathcal{S} \to \Delta(\mathcal{A})$, the value function induced by π is defined as

$$V^\pi(s) = \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t \mathcal{R}(s_t, a_t) \mid s_0 = s, \pi\right].$$

1. For an arbitrary $Z \in \mathbb{N}$, consider learning with $Z+1$ distinct discount factors $\gamma_0, \gamma_1, \ldots, \gamma_Z$ where the final discount factor matches that of the MDP $\mathcal{M}$, $\gamma_Z = \gamma$. Letting $[Z] \triangleq \{1, 2, \ldots, Z\}$ denote the index set, we define the following functions for any policy π:

$$V^\pi_{\gamma_z} = \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma_z^t \mathcal{R}(s_t, a_t) \mid s_0 = s, \pi\right] \qquad W^\pi_z = V^\pi_{\gamma_z} - V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}, \qquad \forall z \in [Z]$$

where $W_0 = V^\pi_{\gamma_0}$.

Solution: The results of this part were derived by Romoff et al. [2019] who both empirically and theoretically study the benefits of decomposing a single monolithic value function across multiple time-scales through smaller discount factors.

(a) For any $z \in [Z]$; any policy $\pi : \mathcal{S} \to \Delta(\mathcal{A})$; and any $s \in \mathcal{S}$, write an expression for $V^\pi_{\gamma_z}(s)$ exclusively in terms of $\{W^\pi_0, W^\pi_1, \ldots, W^\pi_Z\}$.

Solution: From the relationships defined above, we can see that

$$V^\pi_{\gamma_z}(s) = \sum_{i=0}^{z} W^\pi_i(s).$$

(b) Show that W^π_z obeys the following Bellman equation for any $z \in [Z]$ and $s \in \mathcal{S}$:

$$W^\pi_z(s) = \mathbb{E}_{\substack{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s) \\ s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}}\left[(\gamma_z - \gamma_{z-1})V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}(s') + \gamma_z W^\pi_z(s')\right]$$

Solution: Just by expanding the corresponding Bellman equations for $V^\pi_{\gamma_z}$ and $V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}$, we have

$$\begin{aligned}
W^\pi_z(s) &= V^\pi_{\gamma_z} - V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}} \\
&= \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{R}(s,a) + \gamma_z \mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_{\gamma_z}(s')\right] - \mathcal{R}(s,a) - \gamma_{z-1}\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}(s')\right]\right] \\
&= \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\gamma_z \mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_{\gamma_z}(s')\right] - \gamma_{z-1}\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}(s')\right]\right] \\
&= \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\gamma_z \mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[W^\pi_z(s') + V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}(s')\right] - \gamma_{z-1}\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}(s')\right]\right] \\
&= \mathbb{E}_{\substack{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s) \\ s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}}\left[(\gamma_z - \gamma_{z-1})V^\pi_{\gamma_{z-1}}(s') + \gamma_z W_z(s')\right].
\end{aligned}$$

2. Let $\gamma, \beta \in [0,1)$ be two discount factors such that $\beta \leq \gamma$. Let $\pi : \mathcal{S} \to \Delta(\mathcal{A})$ be an arbitrary policy that induces value functions V^π_γ and V^π_β under the two discount factors, respectively. Similarly, define the Bellman operators

$$\mathcal{B}^\pi_\gamma V(s) = \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{R}(s,a) + \gamma\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V(s')\right]\right]$$
$$\mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V(s) = \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{R}(s,a) + \beta\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V(s')\right]\right].$$

With the reward upper bound $R_{\text{MAX}} = \max\limits_{(s,a)\in\mathcal{S}\times\mathcal{A}} \mathcal{R}(s,a)$, prove that

$$||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \leq \frac{(\gamma-\beta)R_{\text{MAX}}}{(1-\gamma)(1-\beta)}.$$

Solution: This result is given as Theorem 2 of [Petrik and Scherrer, 2008] and highlights the approximation error that can occur by using a smaller discount factor β than that of the true MDP, γ.

$$\begin{aligned}
||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty &= ||\mathcal{B}^\pi_\gamma V^\pi_\gamma - \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&= ||\mathcal{B}^\pi_\gamma V^\pi_\gamma - \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\gamma + \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\gamma - \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&\leq ||\mathcal{B}^\pi_\gamma V^\pi_\gamma - \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\gamma||_\infty + ||\mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\gamma - \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&\leq ||\mathcal{B}^\pi_\gamma V^\pi_\gamma - \mathcal{B}^\pi_\beta V^\pi_\gamma||_\infty + \beta||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&= \max_{s\in\mathcal{S}} |\mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{R}(s,a) + \gamma\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_\gamma(s')\right] - \mathcal{R}(s,a) - \beta\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_\gamma(s')\right]\right]| + \beta||V \\
&= \max_{s\in\mathcal{S}} |\mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\gamma\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_\gamma(s')\right] - \beta\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_\gamma(s')\right]\right]| + \beta||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&= \max_{s\in\mathcal{S}} |\mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[(\gamma-\beta)\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[V^\pi_\gamma(s')\right]\right]| + \beta||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&\leq \max_{s\in\mathcal{S}} |\mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[(\gamma-\beta)\mathbb{E}_{s'\sim\mathcal{T}(\cdot|s,a)}\left[\frac{R_{\text{MAX}}}{(1-\gamma)}\right]\right]| + \beta||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
&= \frac{(\gamma-\beta)R_{\text{MAX}}}{(1-\gamma)} + \beta||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty \\
\implies (1-\beta)||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty &\leq \frac{(\gamma-\beta)R_{\text{MAX}}}{(1-\gamma)} \\
||V^\pi_\gamma - V^\pi_\beta||_\infty &\leq \frac{(\gamma-\beta)R_{\text{MAX}}}{(1-\gamma)(1-\beta)}
\end{aligned}$$

3. Let $\alpha, \gamma \in [0,1)$ be two discount factors such that $\gamma \leq \alpha$. Consider a new MDP $\mathcal{M}' = \langle\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{T}', \mathcal{R}, \alpha\rangle$ with a different transition function $\mathcal{T}' : \mathcal{S}\times\mathcal{A} \to \Delta(\mathcal{S})$ defined for $\lambda \in [0,1]$ as

$$\mathcal{T}'(s' \mid s,a) = (1-\lambda)\mathcal{T}(s' \mid s,a) + \lambda\mathbb{1}(s = s'), \qquad \forall(s,a,s') \in \mathcal{S}\times\mathcal{A}\times\mathcal{S}.$$

In words, the new transition function $\mathcal{T}'$ follows the transitions of the original MDP $\mathcal{T}$ with probability $(1-\lambda)$ and takes a self-looping transition with probability λ. We will use subscripts to distinguish between value functions of $\mathcal{M}$ versus those of $\mathcal{M}'$.

Assuming that both $\mathcal{M}$ and $\mathcal{M}'$ are tabular, recall the matrix form of the Bellman equations for any policy π:

$$V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}} = (I - \gamma\mathcal{T}^\pi)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \qquad V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}'} = (I - \alpha\mathcal{T}'^\pi)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi,$$

where

$$\mathcal{R}^\pi(s) = \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{R}(s,a)\right] \qquad \mathcal{T}^\pi(s' \mid s) = \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{T}(s' \mid s,a)\right] \qquad \mathcal{T}'^\pi(s' \mid s) = \mathbb{E}_{a\sim\pi(\cdot|s)}\left[\mathcal{T}'(s' \mid s,a)\right]$$

Solution: The results of this question are proven as part of Theorem 1 in [Jiang et al., 2015].

(a) Give a value of λ such that, for any policy π,

$$V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}'} = \frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha} \cdot V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}}.$$

Solution: We can write the transition matrix in the new MDP $\mathcal{M}'$ induced by any policy π as

$$\mathcal{T}'^\pi = (1-\lambda)\mathcal{T}^\pi + \lambda I,$$

where I is the $|\mathcal{S}| \times |\mathcal{S}|$ identity matrix. So, substituting in directly, we have

$$\begin{aligned}
V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}'} &= \left(I - \alpha\mathcal{T}'^\pi\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \\
&= \left(I - \alpha\left((1-\lambda)\mathcal{T}^\pi + \lambda I\right)\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \\
&= \left((1-\alpha\lambda)I - \alpha(1-\lambda)\mathcal{T}^\pi\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \\
&= \left((1-\alpha\lambda)\left(I - \frac{\alpha(1-\lambda)}{1-\alpha\lambda}\mathcal{T}^\pi\right)\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \\
&= \frac{1}{1-\alpha\lambda}\left(I - \frac{\alpha(1-\lambda)}{1-\alpha\lambda}\mathcal{T}^\pi\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi.
\end{aligned}$$

We can compute the required value of λ as

$$\frac{\alpha(1-\lambda)}{1-\alpha\lambda} = \gamma \implies \lambda = \frac{\alpha-\gamma}{\alpha(1-\gamma)},$$

which means

$$\frac{1}{1-\alpha\lambda} = \frac{1}{1-\frac{\alpha-\gamma}{(1-\gamma)}} = \frac{1-\gamma}{1-\gamma-\alpha+\gamma} = \frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha}.$$

Substituting back in to the earlier equation yields

$$\begin{aligned}
V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}'} &= \frac{1}{1-\alpha\lambda}\left(I - \frac{\alpha(1-\lambda)}{1-\alpha\lambda}\mathcal{T}^\pi\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \\
&= \frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha}\left(I - \gamma\mathcal{T}^\pi\right)^{-1}\mathcal{R}^\pi \\
&= \frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha} \cdot V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}}.
\end{aligned}$$

(b) If $\pi^\star$ is the optimal policy of MDP $\mathcal{M}$, prove that $\pi^\star$ is also optimal in $\mathcal{M}'$.

Solution: By definition of the optimal policy, we know that $\pi^\star$ obeys the following inequality for any other policy π:

$$V^{\pi^\star}_{\mathcal{M}}(s) \geq V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}}(s), \qquad \forall s \in \mathcal{S}.$$

Since $\frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha} > 0$, we can scale both sides to get

$$\frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha} \cdot V^{\pi^\star}_{\mathcal{M}}(s) \geq \frac{1-\gamma}{1-\alpha} \cdot V^\pi_{\mathcal{M}}(s), \qquad \forall s \in \mathcal{S}.$$

Applying this previous part, we see that for any other policy π,

$$V^{\pi^\star}_{\mathcal{M}'}(s) \geq V^{\pi}_{\mathcal{M}'}(s), \qquad \forall s \in \mathcal{S}.$$

Thus, by definition, $\pi^\star$ is also the optimal policy in MDP $\mathcal{M}'$. This result illustrates that, for any MDP with a particular discount factor, there exists a transition function for another MDP with a larger discount factor such that the two MDPs have the same optimal policy.

References

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