**Decision Trees (DTs)** are a non-parametric supervised learning method used for [classification](http://ogrisel.github.io/scikit-learn.org/sklearn-tutorial/modules/tree.html#tree-classification) and [regression](http://ogrisel.github.io/scikit-learn.org/sklearn-tutorial/modules/tree.html#tree-regression). The goal is to create a model that predicts the value of a target variable by learning simple decision rules inferred from the data features.

For instance, in the example below, decision trees learn from data to approximate a sine curve with a set of if-then-else decision rules. The deeper the tree, the more complex the decision rules and the fitter the model.

**Advantages**

* Simple to understand and interpret. Trees can be visualised.
* Requires little data preparation. Other techniques often require data normalisation, dummy variables need to be created and blank values to be removed. Note however that this module does not support missing values.
* The cost of using the tree (i.e., predicting data) is logarithmic in the number of data points used to train the tree.
* Able to handle both numerical and categorical data. Other techniques are usually specialised in analysing datasets that have only one type of variable. See [*algorithms*](http://ogrisel.github.io/scikit-learn.org/sklearn-tutorial/modules/tree.html#tree-algorithms) for more information.
* Uses a white box model. If a given situation is observable in a model, the explanation for the condition is easily explained by boolean logic. By constrast, in a black box model (e.g., in an artificial neural network), results may be more difficult to interpret.
* Possible to validate a model using statistical tests. That makes it possible to account for the reliability of the model.
* Performs well even if its assumptions are somewhat violated by the true model from which the data were generated.

**Disadvantages**

* Decision-tree learners can create over-complex trees that do not generalise the data well. This is called overfitting. Mechanisms such as pruning (not currently supported), setting the minimum number of samples required at a leaf node or setting the maximum depth of the tree are necessary to avoid this problem.
* Decision trees can be unstable because small variations in the data might result in a completely different tree being generated. This problem is mitigated by using decision trees within an ensemble.
* The problem of learning an optimal decision tree is known to be NP-complete under several aspects of optimality and even for simple concepts. Consequently, practical decision-tree learning algorithms are based on heuristic algorithms such as the greedy algorithm where locally optimal decisions are made at each node. Such algorithms cannot guarantee to return the globally optimal decision tree. This can be mitigated by training multiple trees in an ensemble learner, where the features and samples are randomly sampled with replacement.
* There are concepts that are hard to learn because decision trees do not express them easily, such as XOR, parity or multiplexer problems.
* Decision tree learners create biased trees if some classes dominate. It is therefore recommended to balance the dataset prior to fitting with the decision tree.

**Tree algorithms:**

1. ID3: Iterative Dichotomiser. The algorithm creates a multiway tree, finding for each node (i.e. in a greedy manner) the categorical feature that will yield the largest information gain for categorical targets. Trees are grown to their maximum size and then a pruning step is usually applied to improve the ability of the tree to generalise to unseen data.
2. C4.5: C4.5 is the successor to ID3 and removed the restriction that features must be categorical by dynamically defining a discrete attribute (based on numerical variables) that partitions the continuous attribute value into a discrete set of intervals. C4.5 converts the trained trees (i.e. the output of the ID3 algorithm) into sets of if-then rules. These accuracy of each rule is then evaluated to determine the order in which they should be applied. Pruning is done by removing a rule’s precondition if the accuracy of the rule improves without it.
3. C5.0: C5.0 is Quinlan’s latest version release under a proprietary license. It uses less memory and builds smaller rulesets than C4.5 while being more accurate.
4. CART: (Classification and Regression Trees) is very similar to C4.5, but it differs in that it supports numerical target variables (regression) and does not compute rule sets. CART constructs binary trees using the feature and threshold that yield the largest information gain at each node.

scikit-learn uses an optimised version of the CART algorithm.