

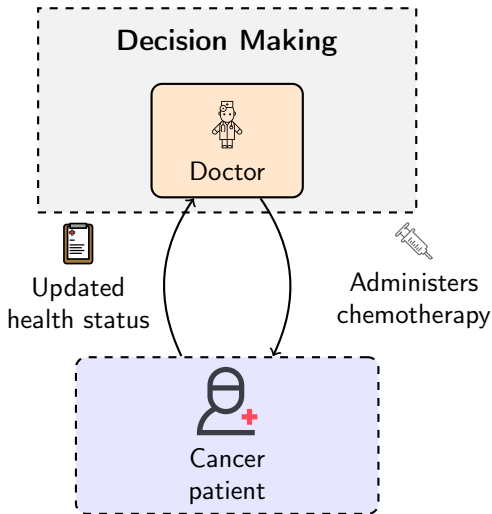
Interpretability, Decision Trees, and Sequential Decision Making

Hector Kohler

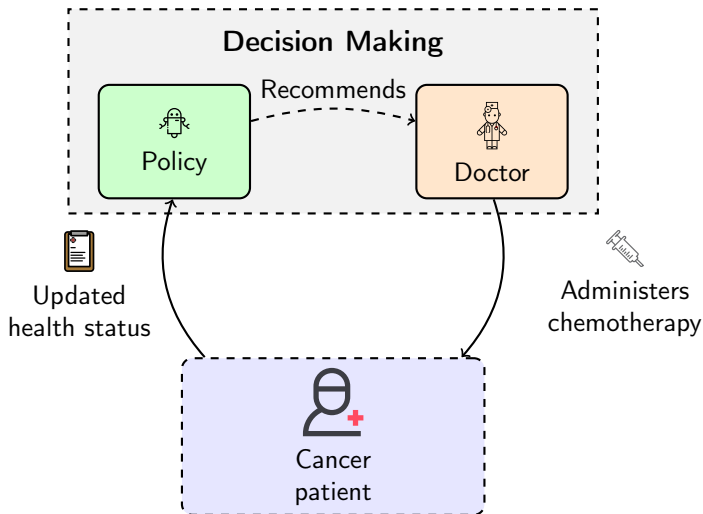
Supervised by Dr. Riad Akrouir (HdR) and Prof. Philippe Preux (HdR)
Université de Lille, CNRS, Inria, UMR CRISAL 9189, France

December 2, 2025

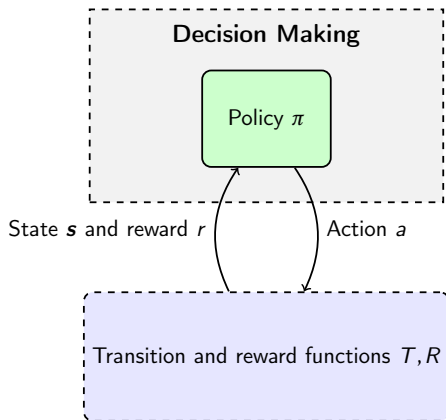
Sequential decision making (SDM)



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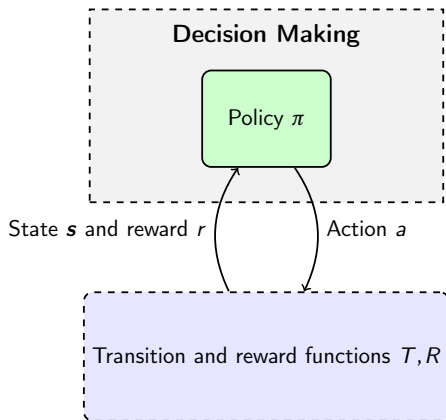


Markov decision processes (MDPs) and reinforcement learning (RL)



Markov decision processes (Puterman 1994).

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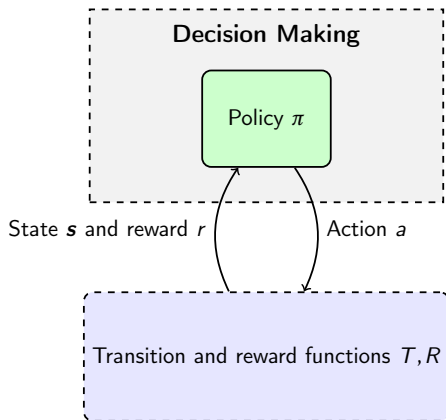


- RL (Sutton and Barto 1998) aims to find a policy, $\pi : S \rightarrow A$ that maximizes:

$$J(\pi) = \mathbb{E}_{s_t \sim T} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t R(s_t, \pi(s_t)) \right]$$

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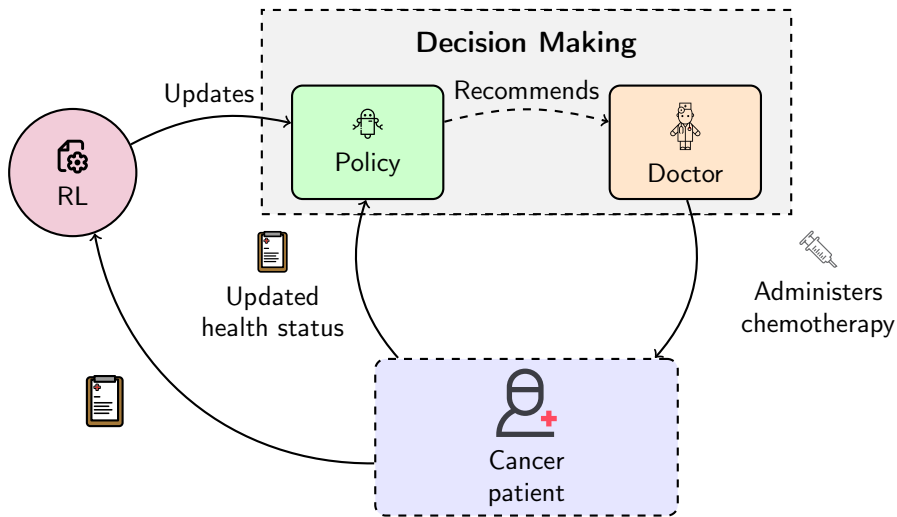
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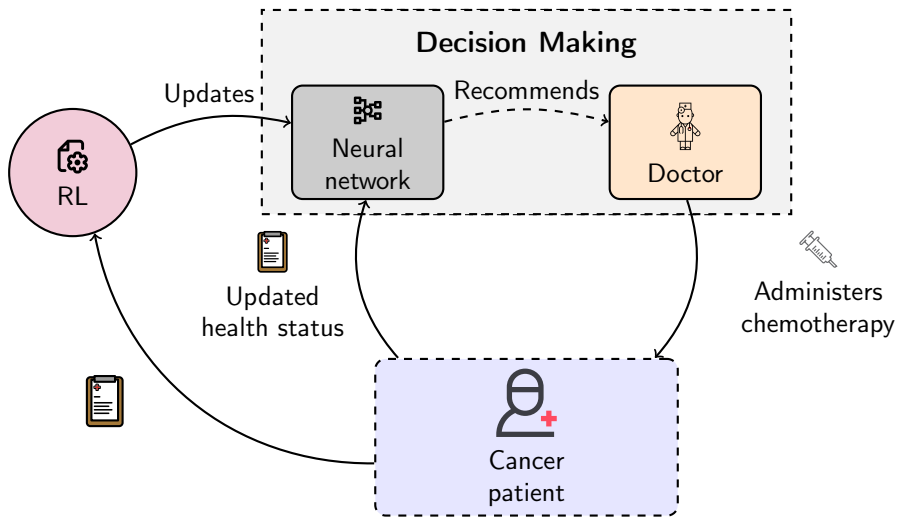
$$J(\pi) = \mathbb{E}_{s_t \sim T} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t R(s_t, \pi(s_t)) \right]$$

- Lots of successful RL algorithms (Schulman et al. 2017).

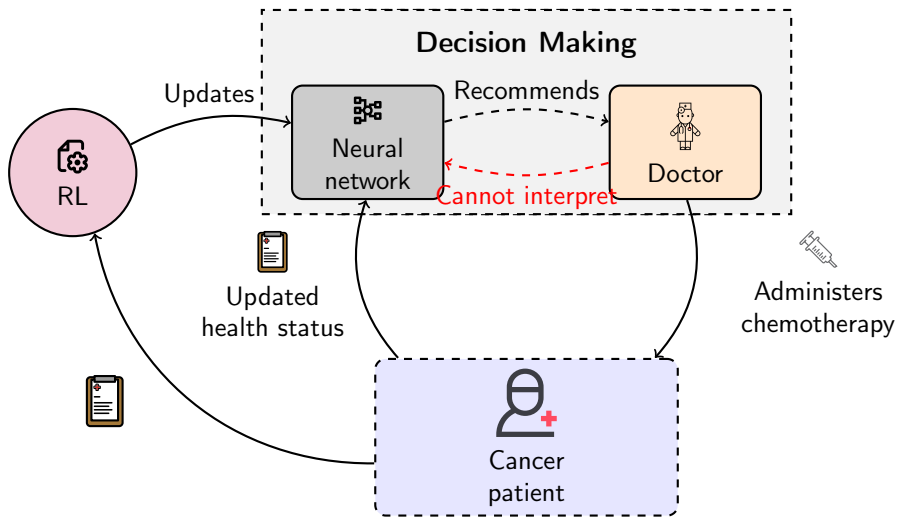
Sequential decision making (SDM) and machine learning (ML)



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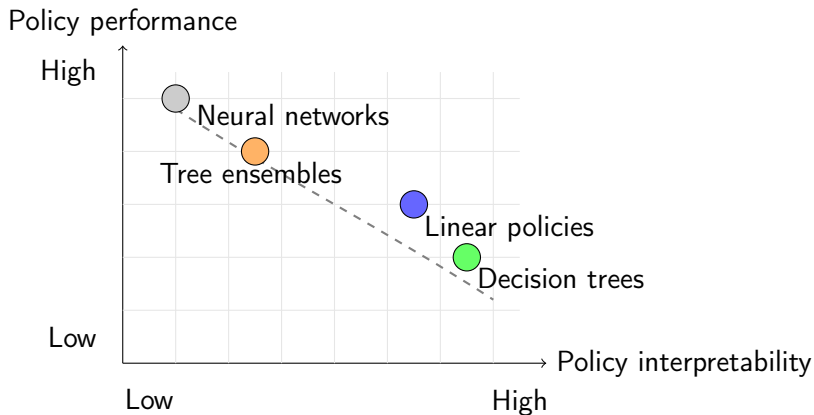
Local vs. global interpretability (Glanois et al. 2024).

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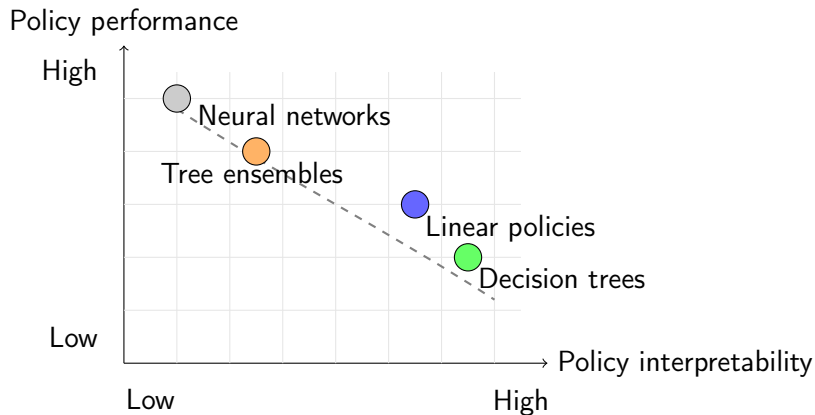
Saliency maps of different MDP states (Greydanus et al. 2018).

Local vs. global interpretability (Glanois et al. 2024).



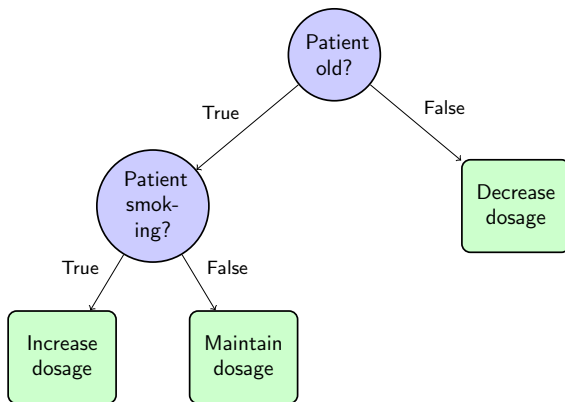
Global interpretation.

Local vs. global interpretability (Glanois et al. 2024).



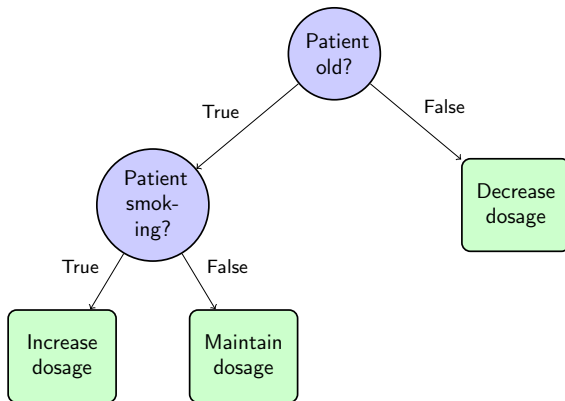
⚠ Multiple definitions (Lipton 2018).

Decision trees



A generic decision tree of depth $D = 2$.

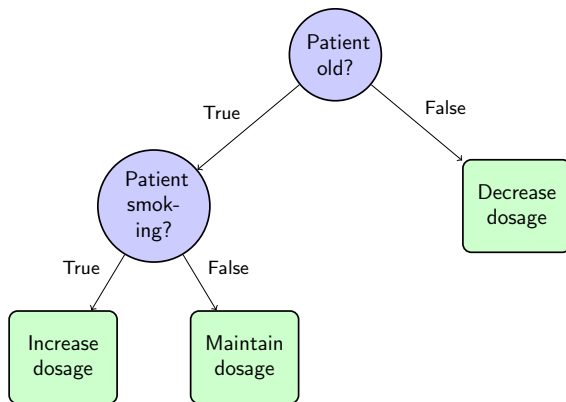
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Successful algorithms for classification/regression (Breiman et al. 1984).

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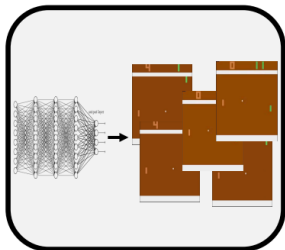


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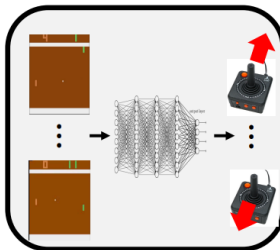
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What about SDM?

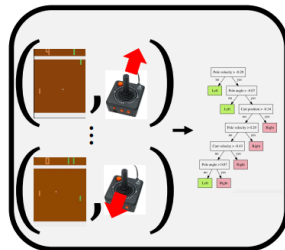
Imitation learning



Step 1: Use NN to generate states

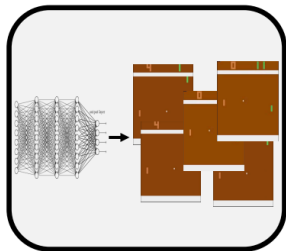


Step 2: Use NN to obtain actions

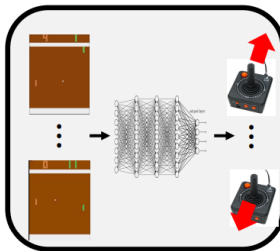


Step 3: Use supervised learning to train a decision tree

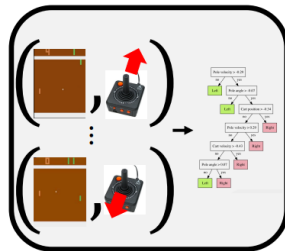
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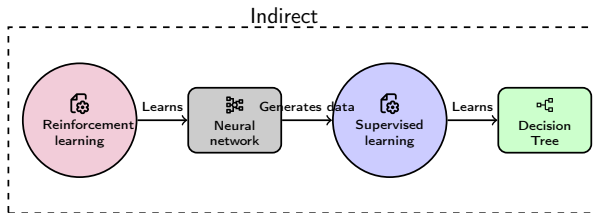
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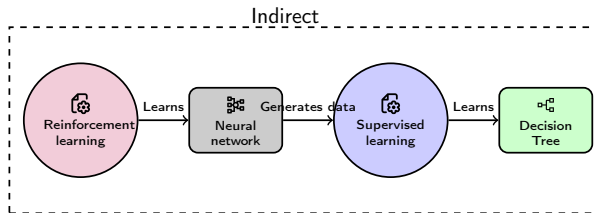
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Most research focused on indirect learning of interpretable policies (Bastani, Pu, and Solar-Lezama 2018).

Two ways to get interpretable policies for SDM (Glanois et al. 2024)

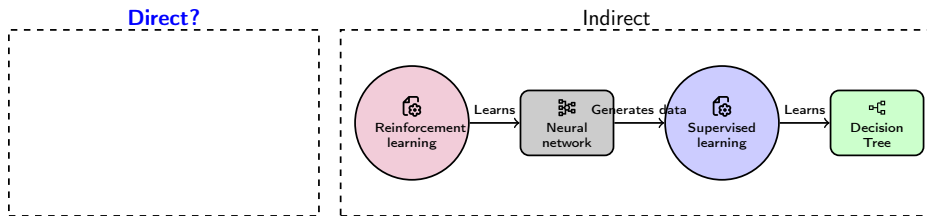


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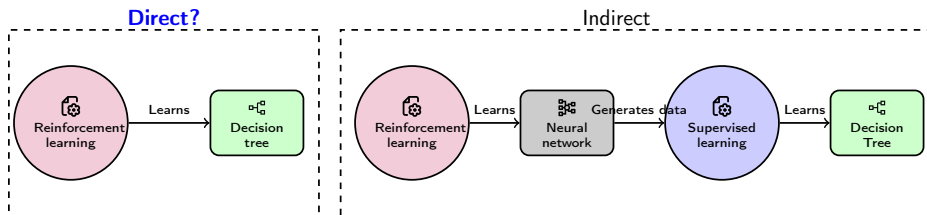
⚠ Policies obtained indirectly optimize a surrogate objective rather than an MDP cumulative rewards.

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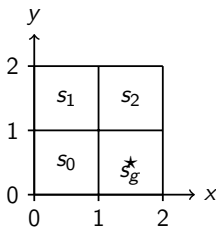
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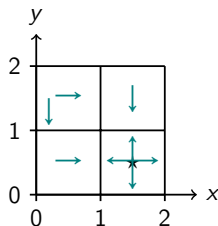
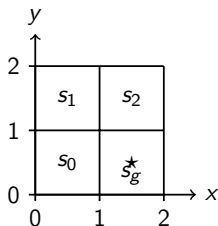
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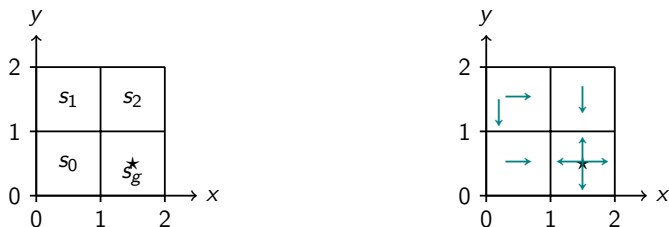
Grid world MDP and decision tree policies



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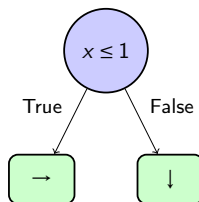


Grid world MDP and optimal actions.

Grid world MDP and decision tree policies



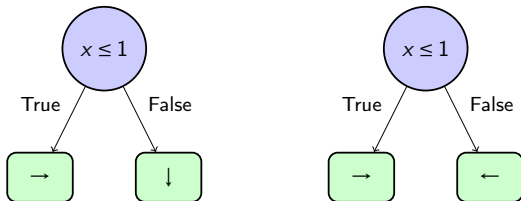
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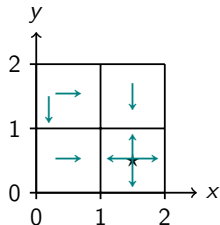
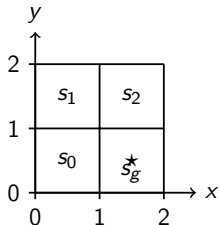
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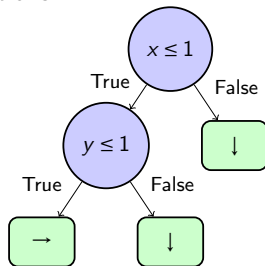
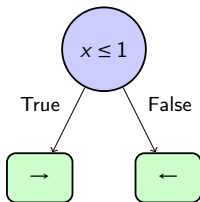
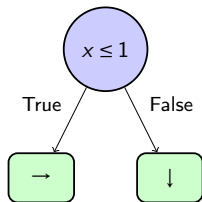
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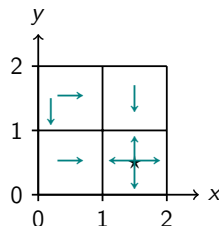
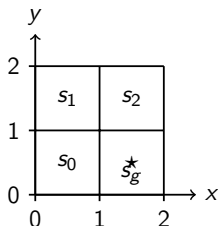
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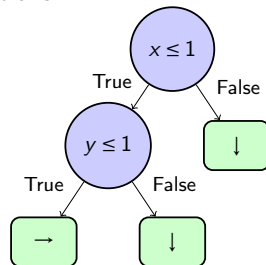
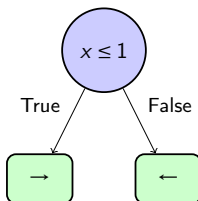
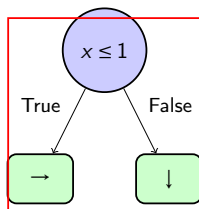
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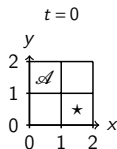


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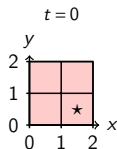


Decision tree policies with different interpretability-performance trade-offs.

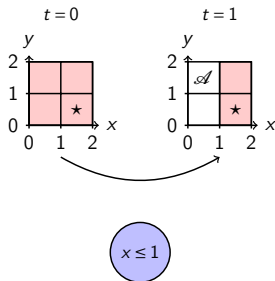
Iterative bounding Markov decision processes (Topin et al. 2021)



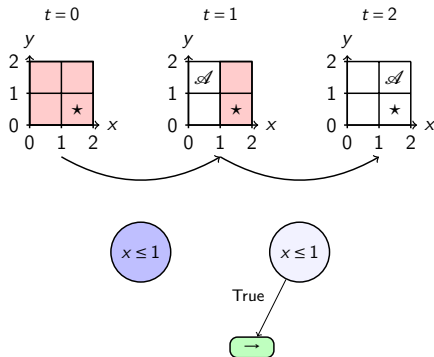
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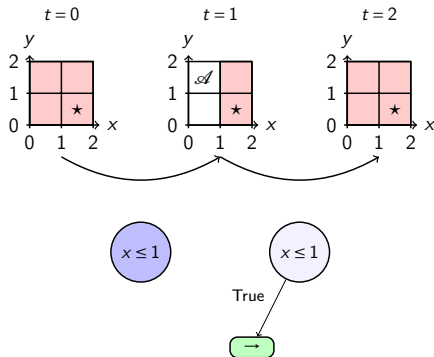
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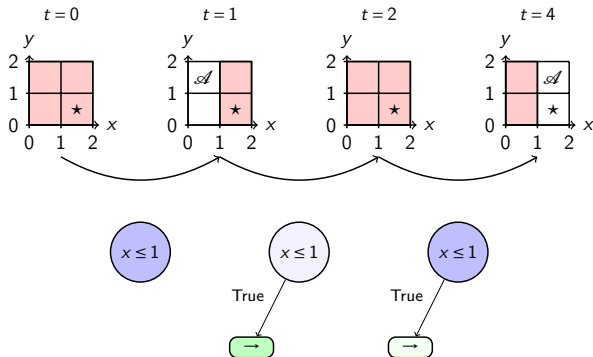
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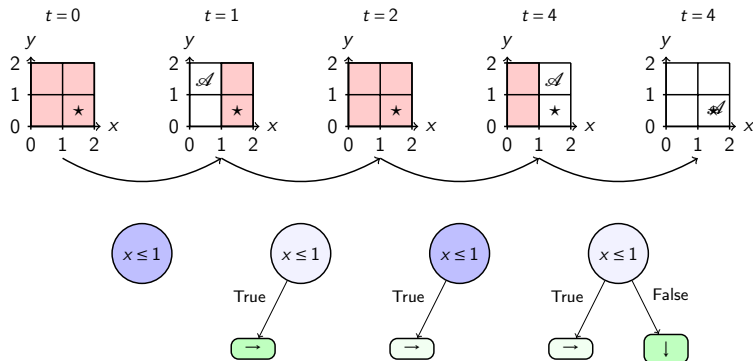
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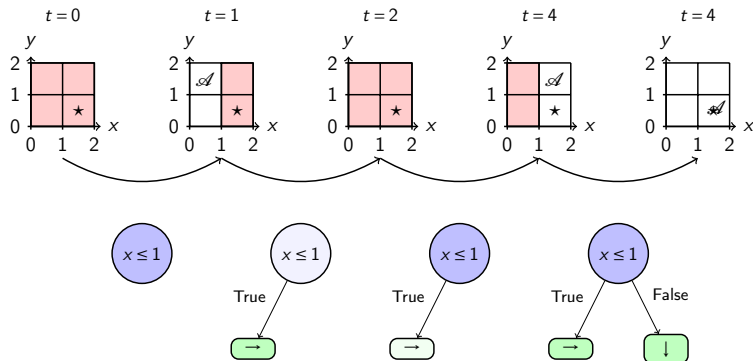
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Given an MDP $\mathcal{M} \langle S, A, R, T \rangle$

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Given an MDP $\mathcal{M} \langle S, A, R, T \rangle$, an IBMDP is an MDP

$$\langle \overbrace{S \times O}^{\text{State space}}, \underbrace{A \cup A_{info}}_{\text{Action space}}, \overbrace{(R, \zeta)}^{\text{Reward function}}, \underbrace{(T_{info}, T)}_{\text{Transitions}} \rangle$$

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- **⚠ IBMDP policies $\pi_{po} : O \rightarrow A \cup A_{info}$ are decision tree policies for \mathcal{M} .**

RL for memoryless policies in POMDPs

RL for memoryless policies

- Finding the best deterministic and memoryless policy in a POMDP is NP-hard (Littman 1994)!
- The best memoryless policy can be stochastic (S. P. Singh, Jaakkola, and Jordan 1994).
- Value-based RL converges to sub-optimal solutions.

Asymmetric RL (Pinto et al. 2017)

- Value-based \rightarrow learns $Q(o, a)$ with TD targets $U(s, a)$ (Baisero, Daley, and Amato 2022).
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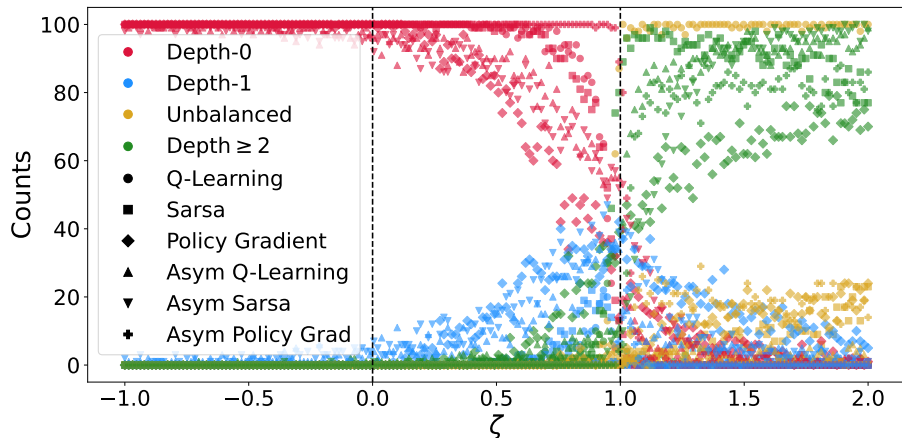
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Result: RL cannot retrieve optimal depth-1 trees for the grid world MDP



Distributions of tree policies learned with (asymmetric) RL algorithms as a function of the interpretability reward ζ .

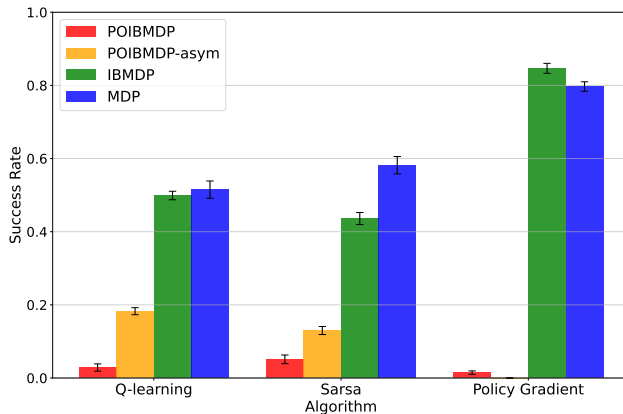
Result: for similar problems, RL struggles more when there is partial observability

| | |
|---|--------------|
|  | POIBMDP |
|  | POIBMDP-asym |
|  | IBMDP |
|  | MDP |

Success rates over thousands of RL runs with varying hyperparameters when learning different policies in the same IBMDP¹.

¹We also observed similar results on classic controls and variants of the grid world MDP.

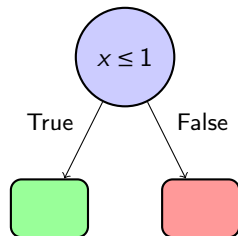
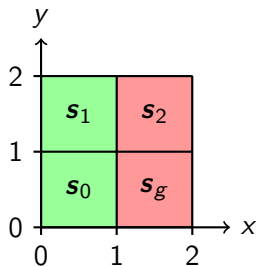
Result: for similar problems, RL struggles more when there is partial observability



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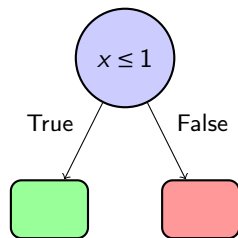
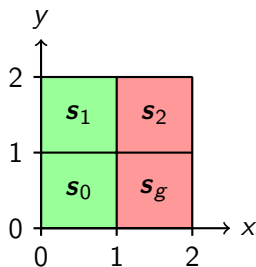
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Result: decision tree policies for classification MDPs are standard Markovian policies in IBMDPs



Classification MDP and the unique optimal depth-1 tree.

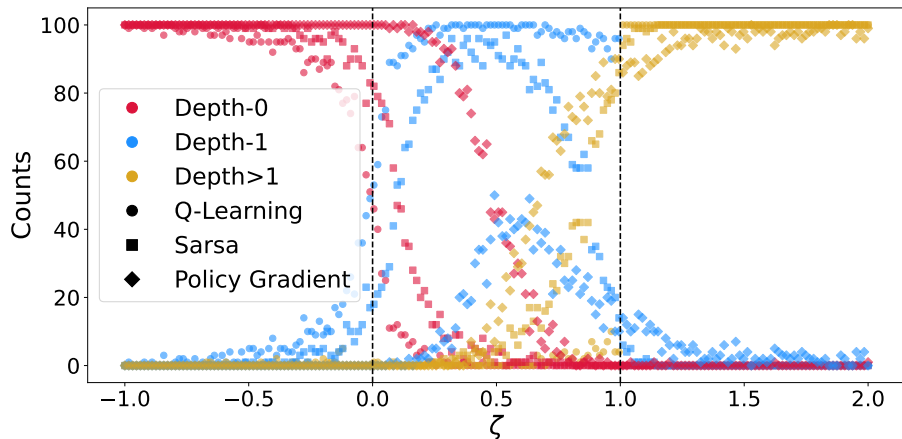
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Classification MDP and the unique optimal depth-1 tree.

Partial observations are sufficient statistics off the full states in classification IBMDPs.

Result: RL can retrieve optimal depth-1 trees for the toy classification MDP



Distributions of tree policies learned with various RL algorithms.

Perspectives for direct RL of decision tree policies.

- It seems that directly learning decision tree trading off interpretability and performances in MDPs can be difficult to achieve because of **partial observability**.
- Should we focus on indirect approaches? Hybrid approaches (Wu et al. 2020)?
- Fixing the policy tree structure a priori (parametric trees, (Marton et al. 2025))?

For classification MDPs, decision tree policies are fully Markovian in associated IBMDPs

Q: Can we leverage SDM to design new decision tree induction algorithms for classification/regression?

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Decision trees in supervised learning

- N data points $\{\mathbf{x}_i, y_i\}$. Each \mathbf{x}_i is described by p features and has a label $y_i \in \mathcal{Y}$. We want to find a tree of depth at most D , $T \in \mathcal{T}_D$ that minimizes:

$$\mathcal{L}_\alpha(T) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N \ell(y_i, T(\mathbf{x}_i)) + \alpha C(T)$$

- Trees **interpretable** and **competitive with neural nets** (Grinsztajn, Oyallon, and Varoquaux 2022).
- Greedy algorithms **sub-optimal accuracy**, but $O(2^D)$ operations (Breiman et al. 1984) .
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Decision tree induction as solving MDPs

Intuition

The induction of a decision tree is made of a sequence of decisions: at each node, we must decide whether it is better to split (a subset of) the training data, or to create a leaf node.

- S: data subsets.
- A: test or leaf nodes that can be added to the tree.
- R: interpretability term $-\alpha$ and accuracies.
- T: node traversals.

Proposition (Objective Equivalence)

Let π be a deterministic policy of the MDP. Then $J_\alpha(\pi) = -\mathcal{L}_\alpha(E(\pi, s_0))$ where E is an algorithm that extracts a decision tree from π (Topin et al. 2021).

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Controlling the time complexity of decision tree induction

- Greedy algorithms consider only one candidate action in each state which is the test that minimizes some impurity criterion
→ MDP state space size is $O(2^D)$.
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Top- B greedy splits (Blanc et al. 2023), quantiles, random...

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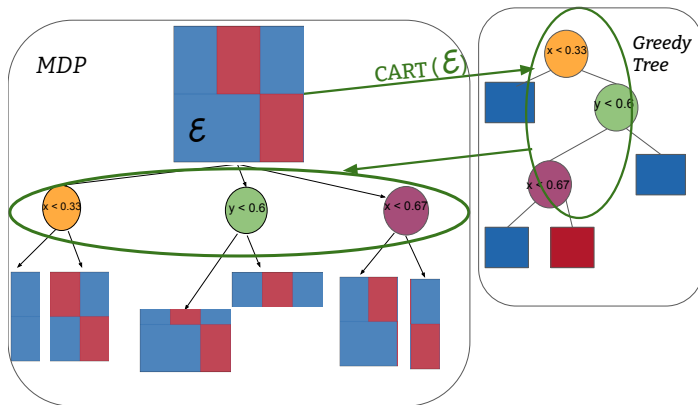
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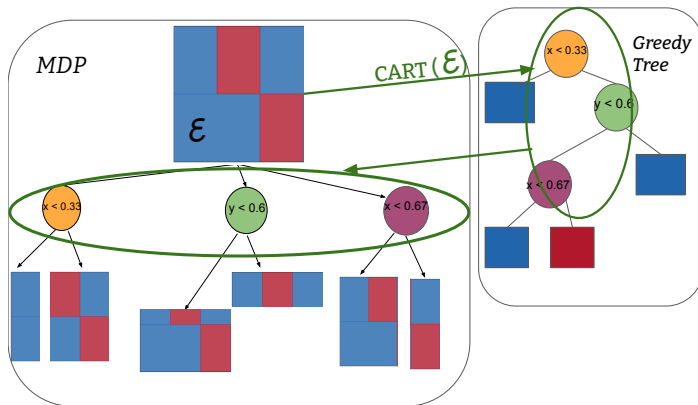
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Practical implemenataion of DPDT



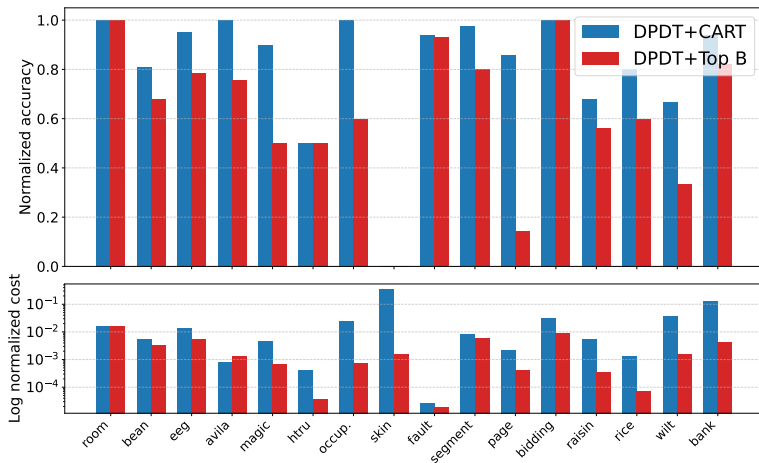
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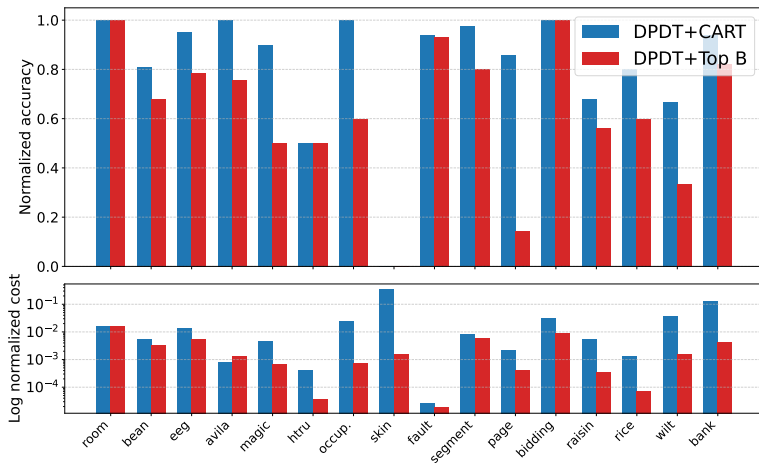
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Fast like greedy trees, accurate like optimal trees



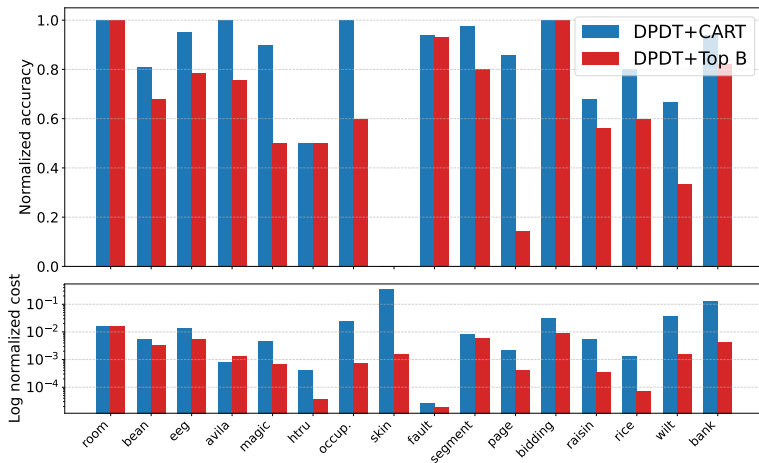
Train accuracies against cost for detph-3 trees.

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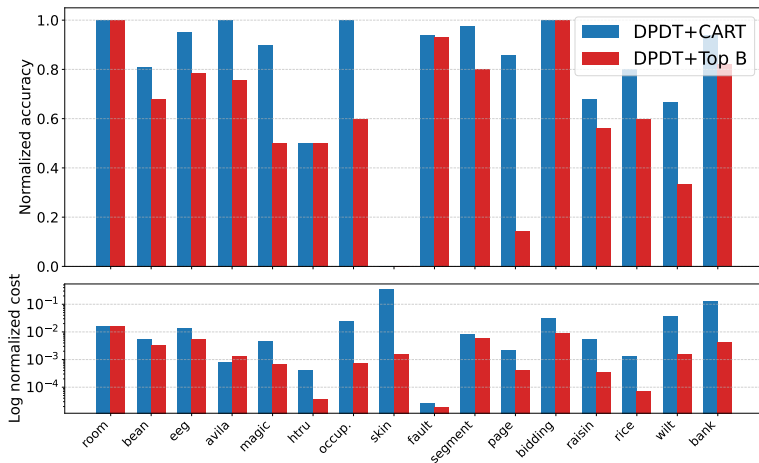
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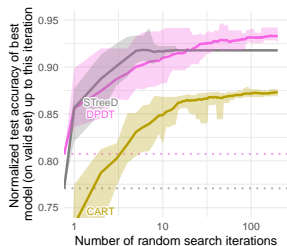
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- CART generates more diverse splits than Top B for DPDT.

Large scale evaluation of DPDT trees generalization

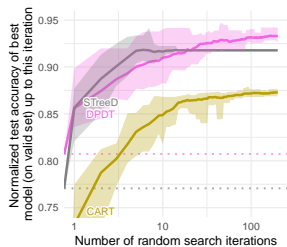
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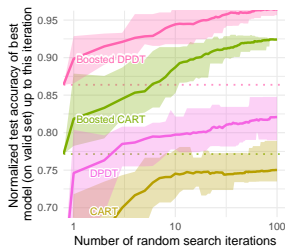
DPDT depth-5 trees vs.
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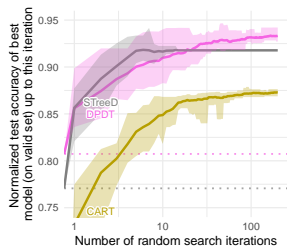
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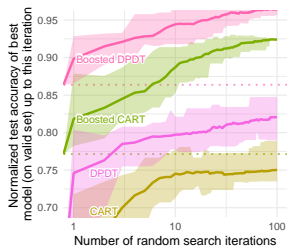
Boosted DPDT vs. Boosted
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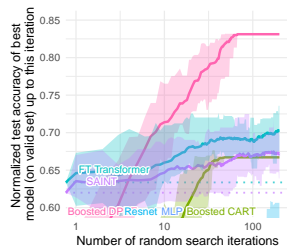
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DPDT depth-5 trees vs. other depth-5 trees



Boosted DPDT vs. Boosted CART



Boosted DPDT vs. other classifiers

- New SOTA decision tree induction with dynamic programming in MDPs.
- What about using DPDT for indirect decision tree policy learning for SDM?
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Challenges (Doshi-Velez and Kim 2017)

- No definition of interpretability.
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We propose policy unfolding

```
# Small ReLU MLP for Pendulum
def play(x):
    h_layer_0_0 = 1.68 * x[0] + -0.69 * x[1] + -0.74 * x[2] + -1.40
    h_layer_0_0 = max(0.0, h_layer_0_0)
    h_layer_0_1 = 0.20 * x[0] + 0.29 * x[1] + -0.021 * x[2] + 1.25
    h_layer_0_1 = max(0.0, h_layer_0_1)
    h_layer_0_2 = 0.33 * x[0] + -0.57 * x[1] + 0.47 * x[2] + 1.94
    h_layer_0_2 = max(0.0, h_layer_0_2)
    h_layer_0_3 = 1.39 * x[0] + 0.94 * x[1] + 0.50 * x[2] + -1.13
    h_layer_0_3 = max(0.0, h_layer_0_3)
    h_layer_1_0 = 1.16 * h_layer_0_0 + -1.59 * h_layer_0_1 + 0.95 * h_layer_0_2 +
        -1.22 * h_layer_0_3 + -0.54
    h_layer_1_0 = max(0.0, h_layer_1_0)
    h_layer_1_1 = -0.55 * h_layer_0_0 + 1.13 * h_layer_0_1 + -0.58 * h_layer_0_2
        + -0.72 * h_layer_0_3 + 1.56
    h_layer_1_1 = max(0.0, h_layer_1_1)
    h_layer_1_2 = 1.10 * h_layer_0_0 + -1.01 * h_layer_0_1 + 0.96 * h_layer_0_2 +
        -2.84 * h_layer_0_3 + -0.02
    h_layer_1_2 = max(0.0, h_layer_1_2)
    h_layer_1_3 = 0.27 * h_layer_0_0 + 0.44 * h_layer_0_1 + 0.39 * h_layer_0_2 +
        0.15 * h_layer_0_3 + -1.24
    h_layer_1_3 = max(0.0, h_layer_1_3)
    h_layer_2_0 = -2.80 * h_layer_1_0 + -0.60 * h_layer_1_1 + 3.07 * h_layer_1_2
        + -1.63 * h_layer_1_3 + -0.36
    y_0 = h_layer_2_0

    return [y_0]
```

Is policy unfolding really necessary?

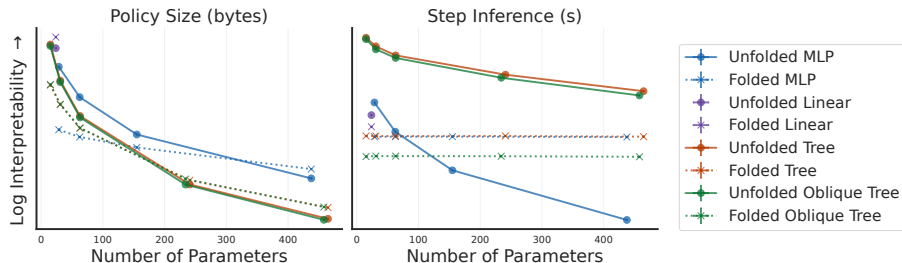
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We imitate ~ 40000 expert policies from `stable-baselines3` using various policy classes/nb parameters on various environments.

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Aggregated policies interpretability on classic control environments

- Beliefs such as "trees are more interpretable than neural networks" should be used with caution.
- What about (very) big models?
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Conclusion: interpretable SDM is a difficult research topic

- Technical challenges: **Learning interpretable policies for SDM involves partial observability.**
 - Focus on indirect approaches and/or on POMDP research first?
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- Fundamental challenges: **No consensus on interpretability definition.**
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My hope

Motivate interpretability by finding a real-world problem where interpretability is *really* necessary (Nagendran et al. 2024).

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Broader perspectives

- **Deep learning:** Can we design deep learning layers that take datasets and output candidate splits?
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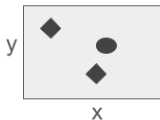


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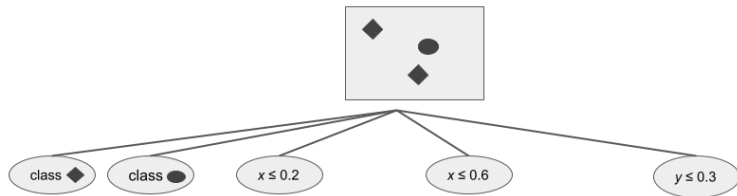
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Decision tree induction as solving MDPs



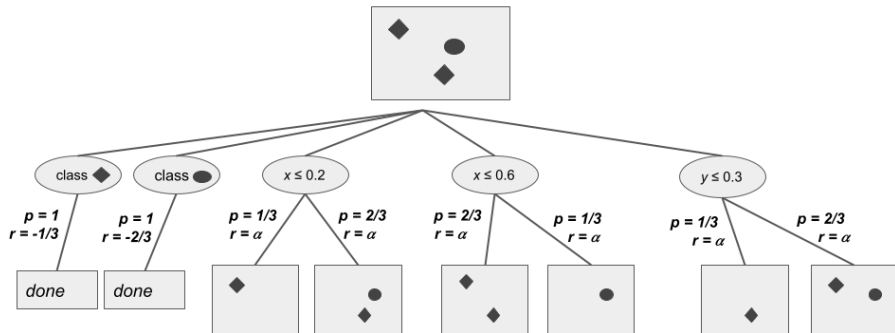
Example of decision tree induction as an MDP.

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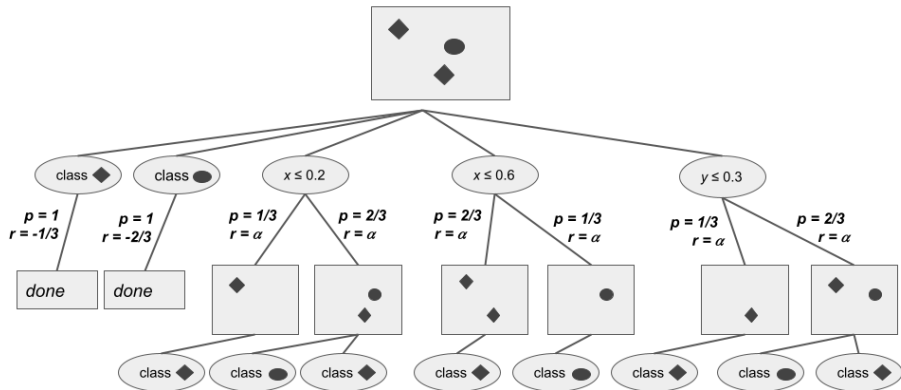
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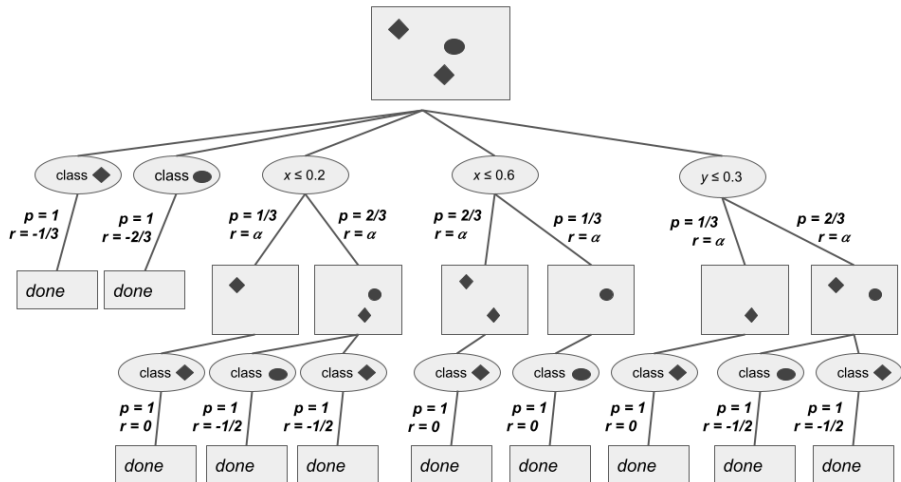
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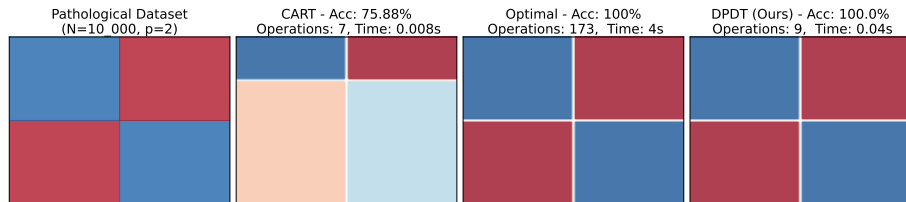
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Fast like greedy trees, accurate like optimal trees



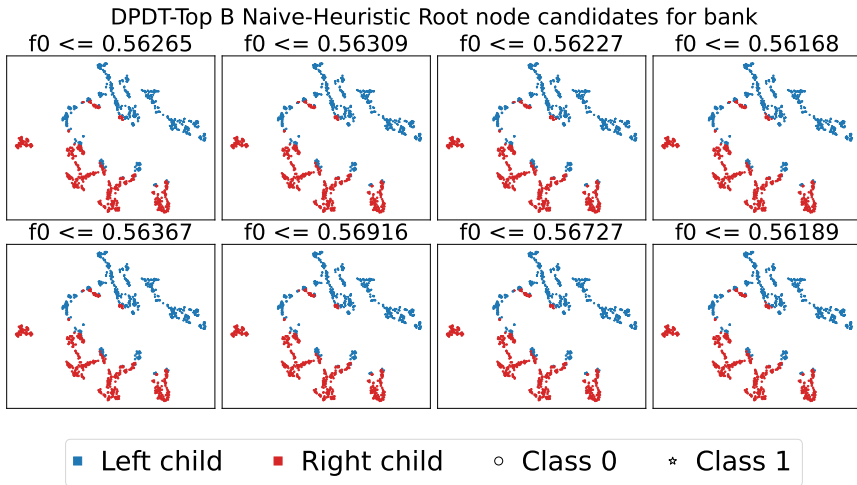
Comparison of greedy, optimal, and DPDT depth-2 trees on the checkersboard dataset.

Fast like greedy trees, accurate like optimal trees

Comparison of accuracies and operations for depth-3 trees.

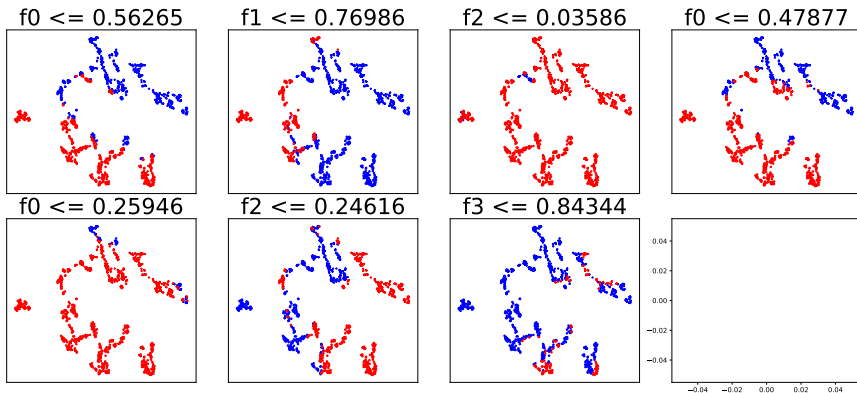
| Dataset | Accuracy | | | | | | Operations | | | | | |
|---------|----------|--------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Opt | Greedy | CART ⁻ | CART ⁺ | TopB ⁻ | TopB ⁺ | Opt | Greedy | CART ⁻ | CART ⁺ | TopB ⁻ | TopB ⁺ |
| room | 0.992 | 0.968 | 0.991 | 0.992 | 0.990 | 0.992 | 10^6 | 15 | 286 | 16100 | 111 | 16100 |
| bean | 0.871 | 0.777 | 0.812 | 0.853 | 0.804 | 0.841 | $5 \cdot 10^6$ | 15 | 295 | 25900 | 112 | 16800 |
| eeg | 0.708 | 0.666 | 0.689 | 0.706 | 0.684 | 0.699 | $2 \cdot 10^6$ | 13 | 289 | 26000 | 95 | 11000 |
| avila | 0.585 | 0.532 | 0.574 | 0.585 | 0.563 | 0.572 | $3 \cdot 10^7$ | 9 | 268 | 24700 | 60 | 38900 |
| magic | 0.831 | 0.801 | 0.822 | 0.828 | 0.807 | 0.816 | $6 \cdot 10^6$ | 15 | 298 | 28000 | 70 | 4190 |
| htru | 0.981 | 0.979 | 0.979 | 0.980 | 0.979 | 0.980 | $6 \cdot 10^7$ | 15 | 295 | 25300 | 55 | 2180 |
| occup. | 0.994 | 0.989 | 0.991 | 0.994 | 0.990 | 0.992 | $7 \cdot 10^5$ | 13 | 280 | 16300 | 33 | 510 |
| skin | 0.969 | 0.966 | 0.966 | 0.966 | 0.966 | 0.966 | $7 \cdot 10^4$ | 15 | 301 | 23300 | 20 | 126 |
| fault | 0.682 | 0.553 | 0.672 | 0.674 | 0.672 | 0.673 | $9 \cdot 10^8$ | 13 | 295 | 24200 | 111 | 16800 |
| segment | 0.887 | 0.574 | 0.812 | 0.879 | 0.786 | 0.825 | $2 \cdot 10^6$ | 7 | 220 | 16300 | 68 | 11400 |
| page | 0.971 | 0.964 | 0.970 | 0.970 | 0.964 | 0.965 | 10^7 | 15 | 298 | 22400 | 701 | 4050 |
| bidding | 0.993 | 0.981 | 0.985 | 0.993 | 0.985 | 0.993 | $3 \cdot 10^5$ | 13 | 256 | 9360 | 58 | 2700 |
| raisin | 0.894 | 0.869 | 0.879 | 0.886 | 0.875 | 0.883 | $4 \cdot 10^6$ | 15 | 295 | 20900 | 48 | 1440 |
| rice | 0.938 | 0.933 | 0.934 | 0.937 | 0.933 | 0.936 | $2 \cdot 10^7$ | 15 | 298 | 25500 | 49 | 1470 |
| wilt | 0.996 | 0.993 | 0.994 | 0.995 | 0.994 | 0.994 | $3 \cdot 10^5$ | 13 | 274 | 11300 | 33 | 465 |
| bank | 0.983 | 0.933 | 0.971 | 0.980 | 0.951 | 0.974 | $6 \cdot 10^4$ | 13 | 271 | 7990 | 26 | 256 |

CART generates more diverse splits than Top B



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DPDT-CART-Heuristic Root node candidates for bank



Why generating candidate splits with CART?

Theorem (DPDT trees are not worse than greedy trees)

The greedy tree is always a solution of the MDPs we solve. Because we solve the MDPs exactly with DP, if the greedy tree is the best solution, DPDT will find it.

Theorem (DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees)

There exist a depth budget D and a dataset for which DPDT trees are strictly better than greedy trees.^a

^acf. checkersboard dataset.

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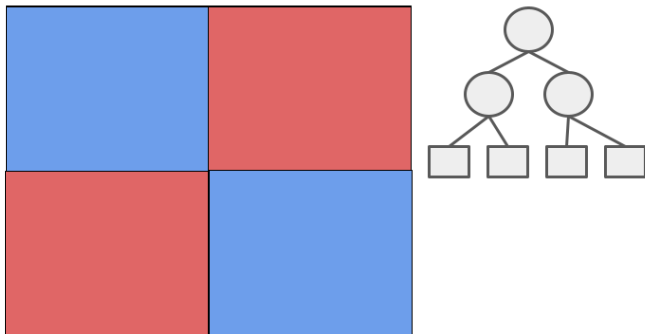
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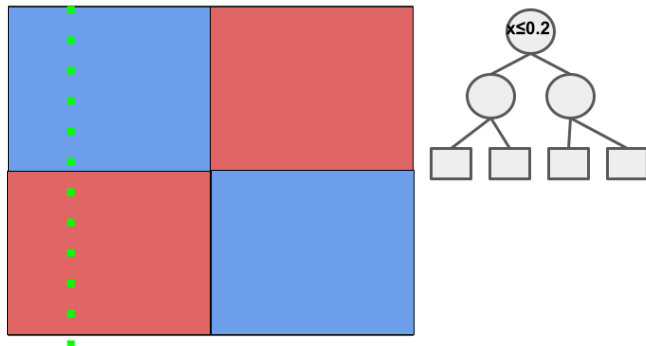
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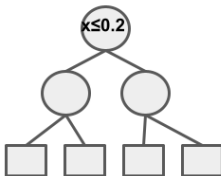
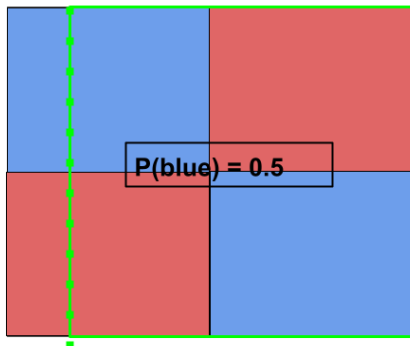
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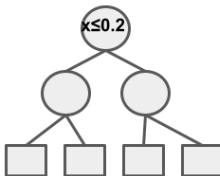
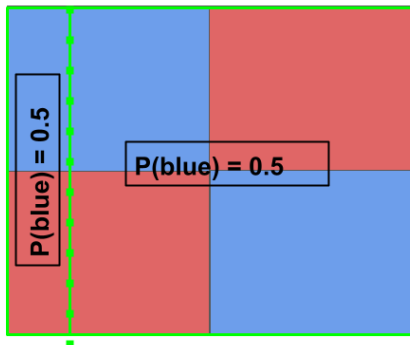
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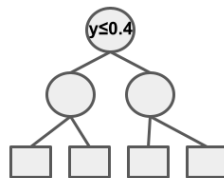
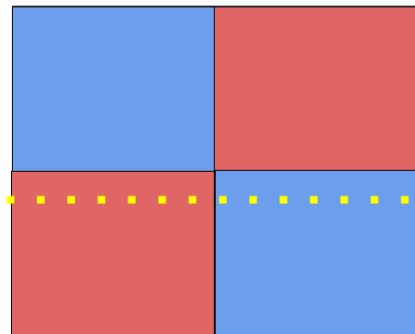
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



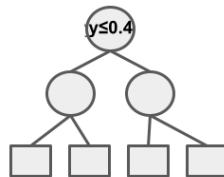
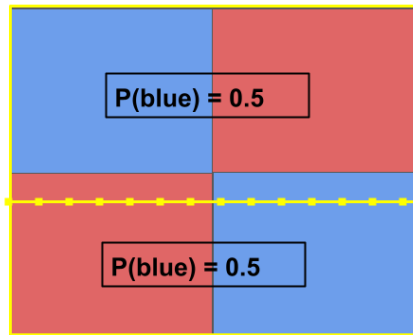
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



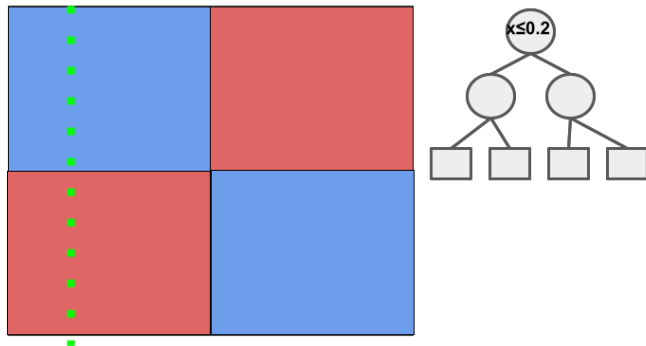
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



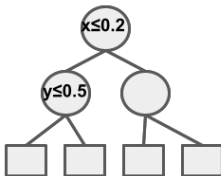
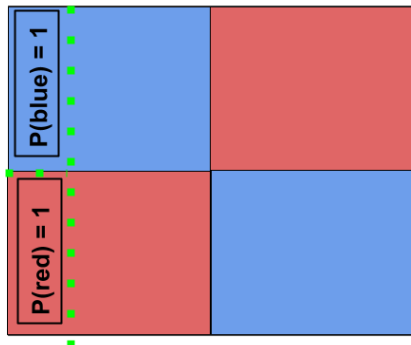
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



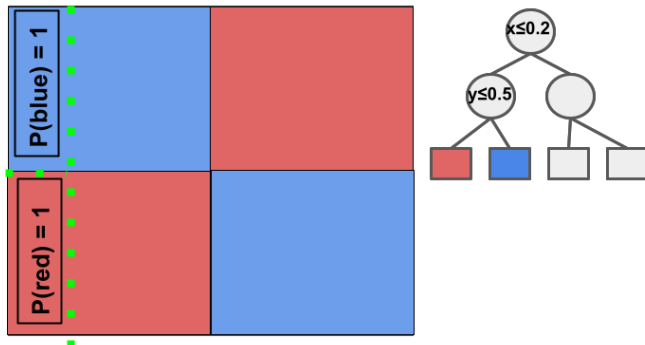
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



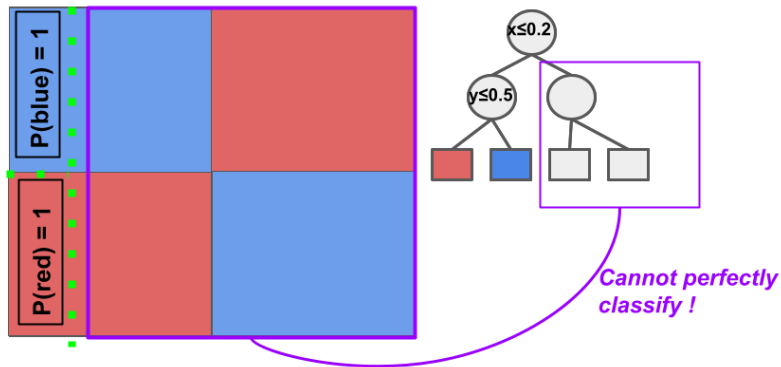
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



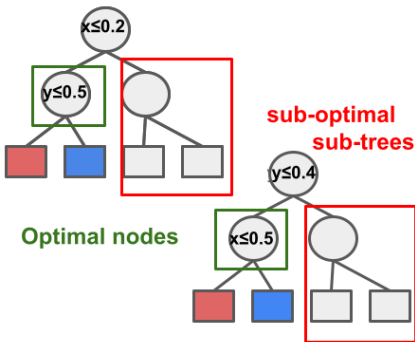
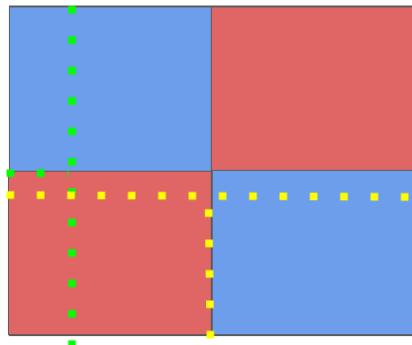
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



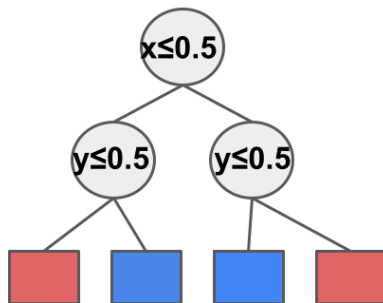
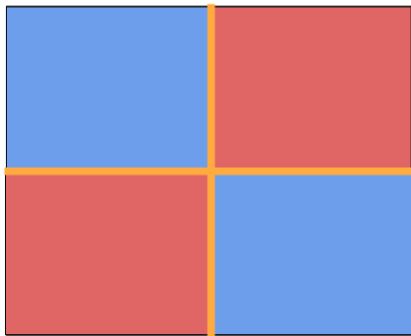
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



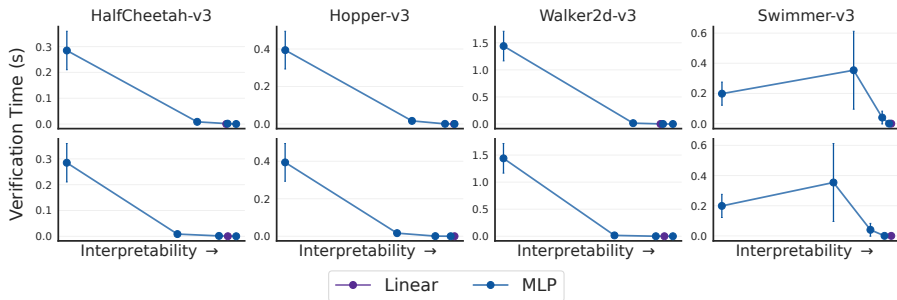
DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees



DPDT trees can be strictly better than greedy trees

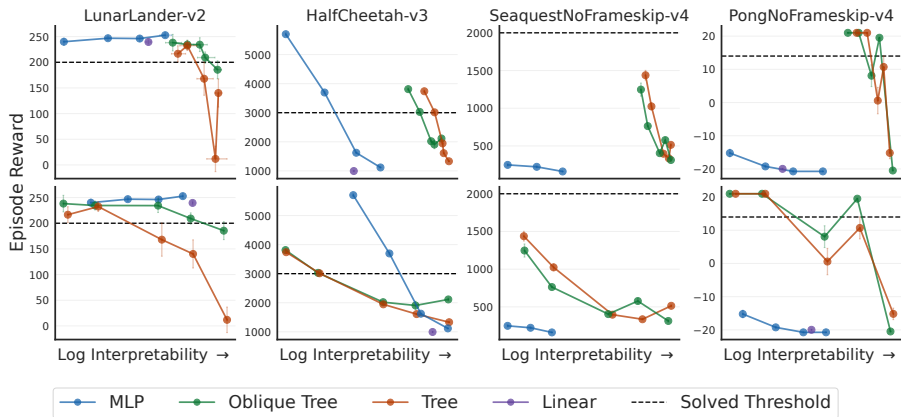


Result: verification time does scale with step inference time



Verification time as a function of policy interpretability. Top row, interpretability is measured with step inference times. Bottom row, the interpretability is measured with policy size.

Result: there is no dominating policy class for all environments



Interpretability-Performance trade-offs. Top row, interpretability is measured with step inference times. Bottom row, the interpretability is measured with policy size.

We propose policy unfolding

```
# Decision tree for Mountain Car
def play(x):
    if x[1] <= -0.2597:
        if x[1] <= -0.6378:
            return 0
        else:
            if x[0] <= -1.0021:
                return 2
            else:
                return 0
    else:
        if x[1] <= -0.0508:
            if x[0] <= 0.2979:
                if x[0] <= 0.0453:
                    return 2
                else:
                    if x[1] <=
-0.2156:
                        return 0
                    else:
                        return 2
            else:
                return 0
        else:
            return 2
```

```
# Small ReLU MLP for Pendulum
def play(x):
    h_layer_0_0 = 1.238*x[0]+0.971*x
    [1]
    +0.430*x[2]+0.933
    h_layer_0_0 = max(0, h_layer_0_0
    )
    h_layer_0_1 = -1.221*x[0]+1.001
    *x[1]-0.423*x[2]
    +0.475
    h_layer_0_1 = max(0, h_layer_0_1
    )
    h_layer_1_0 = -0.109*h_layer_0_0
    -0.377*h_layer_0_1
    +1.694
    h_layer_1_0 = max(0, h_layer_1_0
    )
    h_layer_1_1 = -3.024*h_layer_0_0
    -1.421*h_layer_0_1
    +1.530
    h_layer_1_1 = max(0, h_layer_1_1
    )
    h_layer_2_0 = -1.790*h_layer_1_0
    +2.840*h_layer_1_1
    +0.658
    y_0 = h_layer_2_0
    return [y_0]
```