Stochastic Optimal Control Matching

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Overview

Neural ODE: Continuous Normalizing Flows

Continuous Normalizing Flows (CNF)

CNFs model complex distributions by transforming a simple distribution (e.g., Gaussian) through a continuous-time ODE. The transformation is defined by a neural network that learns the dynamics of the flow.

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Key Idea

Instead of discrete steps, CNFs use a continuous-time approach to model the evolution of the distribution, allowing for more flexible and expressive transformations.

Evolution of Generative Models

2020 **DDPM:** Denoising Diffusion Probabilistic Models interpret generation as reversing a discrete noise-adding process, learning to denoise at each step. They produced high-quality samples but required thousands of slow sampling steps.

2021 **Score-based Models:** Score-based generative models extended diffusion to continuous-time SDEs, learning the score function ($\nabla_x \log p_t(x)$) to reverse a stochastic diffusion process. This unified diffusion with stochastic control, allowed probability flow ODEs, and sped up sampling.

2023 **Flow Matching:** Flow matching views generation as learning a deterministic ODE vector field that directly transports a simple distribution (e.g., Gaussian) to data. This removed stochasticity and significantly improved efficiency compared to diffusion/score methods.

What is a Stochastic Control Problem?

A stochastic control problem involves finding an optimal control policy to steer a dynamical system under uncertainty.

Key Components

- **State Process:** $X_t \in \mathbb{R}^d$ (position in state space at time t)
- **Control Process:** $u_t \in \mathbb{R}^d$ (action/decision at time t)
- **Noise Process:** W_t (random disturbances, typically Brownian motion)

Dynamics (SDE)

$$dX_t = f(X_t, u_t, t)dt + g(X_t, t)dW_t \quad (1)$$

Cost Function

$$J(u) = \mathbb{E}\left[\int_0^T L(X_t, u_t, t)dt + \Phi(X_T)\right] \quad (2)$$

The Goal: Finding Optimal Control

Optimal Control u^*

Find the control policy u^* that minimizes the expected cost: $u^* = \arg\min_u J(u)$

Classical Approaches

- **Hamilton-Jacobi-Bellman (HJB) equation:** Partial differential equation approach
- **Dynamic Programming:** Discrete-time recursive approach

Challenge

These classical methods become computationally intractable in high dimensions due to the *curse of dimensionality*.

Reasons behind SOCM (1/2)

Many fundamental tasks in machine learning can be naturally cast as stochastic optimal control problems, highlighting the importance of efficient SOC methods.

Key ML Applications of SOC

- **Reward fine-tuning of diffusion and flow models:** Optimizing generation quality using reward signals
- **Conditional sampling on diffusion and flow models:** Steering generation towards specific conditions or constraints
- **Sampling from unnormalized densities:** Efficiently drawing samples from complex, intractable distributions
- **Importance sampling of rare events in SDEs:** Computing probabilities of low-probability but critical events

Reasons behind SOCM (2/2)

Current SOC methods suffer from optimization challenges that limit their effectiveness.

Current SOC Methods

- Use **adjoint methods** (like CNFs)
- Yield **non-convex** function landscapes
- Difficult optimization with local minima
- Unstable training dynamics

Diffusion Models Success

- Use **least-squares loss**
- Create **convex** functional landscapes
- Stable and reliable optimization
- Excellent empirical performance

SOCM's Innovation

Goal: Develop least-squares loss formulations for SOC problems, combining the expressiveness of stochastic control with the optimization stability of diffusion models.

SOCM in Context: Optimization Landscapes

Task	Non-convex	Least Squares
Generative Modeling	Maximum Likelihood CNFs	Diffusion models and Flow Matching
Stochastic Optimal Control	Adjoint Methods	**Stochastic Optimal Control Matching**

Introducing Stochastic Optimal Control Matching

SOCM offers a more principled, stable, and accurate way to learn generative dynamics by blending stochastic control theory with modern matching-based generative modeling.

Key Novel Contributions

1. **Controlled Stochastic Process:** Views the generation process as a controlled stochastic process bridging a simple distribution to data.
2. **Least-Squares Matching:** Learning the control via least-squares matching, a stable and convex regression objective.
3. **Joint Optimization:** Optimizing control and variance-reducing reparameterization matrices simultaneously, for efficient learning.
4. **Path-wise Reparameterization:** Introducing a path-wise reparameterization trick, boosting gradient estimation quality.

The SOCM Framework

Key Components

- **Controlled Stochastic Process:** $dX_t = f(X_t, u_t, t)dt + g(X_t, t)dW_t$
- **Cost Function:** $J(u) = \mathbb{E}\left[\int_0^T L(X_t, u_t, t)dt + \Phi(X_T)\right]$
- **Control Policy:** $u^* = \arg\min_u J(u)$

Learning Objective

Minimize the expected cost using a least-squares regression objective:

$$L(u) = \mathbb{E}\left[\|X_T - X_{data}\|^2\right] \tag{3}$$

Advantages of Controlled Stochastic Processes

Why model generation as a controlled stochastic process rather than a fixed deterministic flow?

Key Advantages

1. **Powerful Theoretical Tools:** Access to established methods from stochastic optimal control theory like Hamilton-Jacobi-Bellman equations and dynamic programming.
2. **Learnable Trajectories:** The trajectory of the distribution is no longer fixed (unlike hand-designed noise schedulers in DDPM) and can be learned and optimized to improve efficiency and quality.
3. **Enhanced Interpretability:** The objective becomes finding an optimal control policy, which provides clear insight into how the model moves from its initial distribution to the final complex data distribution.

Blocks of Highlighted Text

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Block

Sample text

Alertblock

Sample text in red box

Examples

Sample text in green box. The title of the block is "Examples".

Multiple Columns

Heading

1. Statement
2. Explanation
3. Example

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Integer lectus nisl, ultricies in feugiat rutrum, porttitor sit amet augue. Aliquam ut tortor mauris. Sed volutpat ante purus, quis accumsan dolor.

Table

Treatments	Response 1	Response 2
Treatment 1	0.0003262	0.562
Treatment 2	0.0015681	0.910
Treatment 3	0.0009271	0.296

Table: Table caption

Theorem

Theorem (Mass–energy equivalence)

$E = mc^2$

Figure

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References