

Policy Gradient Methods

Reinforcement learning – LM Artificial Intelligence
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Introduction

All methods seen **so far** are **action-value methods**. They:

- **estimate** action values
- **select** actions based on these values
- but **do not explicitly represent the policy function**

Policy gradient methods are different. They:

- **learn a parametrized policy function**
- **selects** actions using this **policy** and **without** consulting **value functions**

A **value function** can be used **only to learn policy parameters**

Actor-critic methods are **policy gradient** methods that learn **also** approximations of the **value function**

- **Actor**: learned policy
- **Critic**: learned value function

Introduction

Some **notation**:

- $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$ is the **policy's parameter** vector
- $\pi(a|s, \theta) = \Pr\{A_t = a \mid S_t = s, \theta_t = \theta\}$ is the probability that action a is taken at time t given the environment is in state s and policy parameters are θ
- $\hat{v}(s, \mathbf{w})$ is the learned **value function**, if required by the method, with parameters $\mathbf{w} \in \mathbb{R}^d$
- $J(\theta)$ is a measure of **policy performance** depending on policy parameters

The **goal** of policy gradient methods is to learn parameters θ that **maximize** $J(\theta)$

Introduction

- The **goal** of policy gradient methods is to learn parameters θ that maximize $J(\theta)$
- **Parameter updates** approximate **gradient ascent** in J :

$$\theta_{t+1} = \theta_t + \alpha \widehat{\nabla J(\theta_t)}$$

where $\widehat{\nabla J(\theta_t)} \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$ is a **stochastic estimate of the gradient** of $J(\theta)$ w.r.t. θ_t

- **Episodic case:** performance is the **value of the start state** under the parametrized policy
- **Continuing case:** performance is the **average reward rate**

Policy Approximation and its Advantages

Policy Approximation and its Advantages

- The **policy** can be **parametrized** in any way as long as $\pi(a|s, \theta)$ is **differentiable** w.r.t. its parameters
- To ensure **exploration** we require the policy **never** become **deterministic**, i.e., $\pi(a|s, \theta) \in (0, 1)$
- **Discrete (and not too large) action space**: a natural **parametrization** are numerical **preferences** $h(s, a, \theta) \in \mathbb{R}$ for each state-action pair
- **Probability** is assigned to **actions proportionally to preferences**, e.g., according to **exponential soft-max distribution** (called **soft-max in action preferences**)

$$\pi(a|s, \theta) \doteq \frac{e^{h(s,a,\theta)}}{\sum_b e^{h(s,b,\theta)}}$$

Policy Approximation and its Advantages

- **Preferences** can themselves be **parametrized** arbitrarily
- A **deep ANN** can be used to compute **preferences** (as in AlphaGo).
In this case θ is the vector of connection weights
- Or the preferences could be **linear in the features**:
$$h(s, a, \theta) = \theta^\top \mathbf{x}(s, a) \quad \text{with } \mathbf{x}(s, a) \in \mathbb{R}^{d'} \text{ features of the policy}$$
- **Action values** could be used as preferences with soft-max but this would **not allow the policy to approach deterministic behaviours**
- Instead, **general action preferences** do not have to approach specific values allowing them to approach also deterministic policies
 - E.g., preferences of **optimal** actions can be driven **infinitely higher** than all **suboptimal** actions

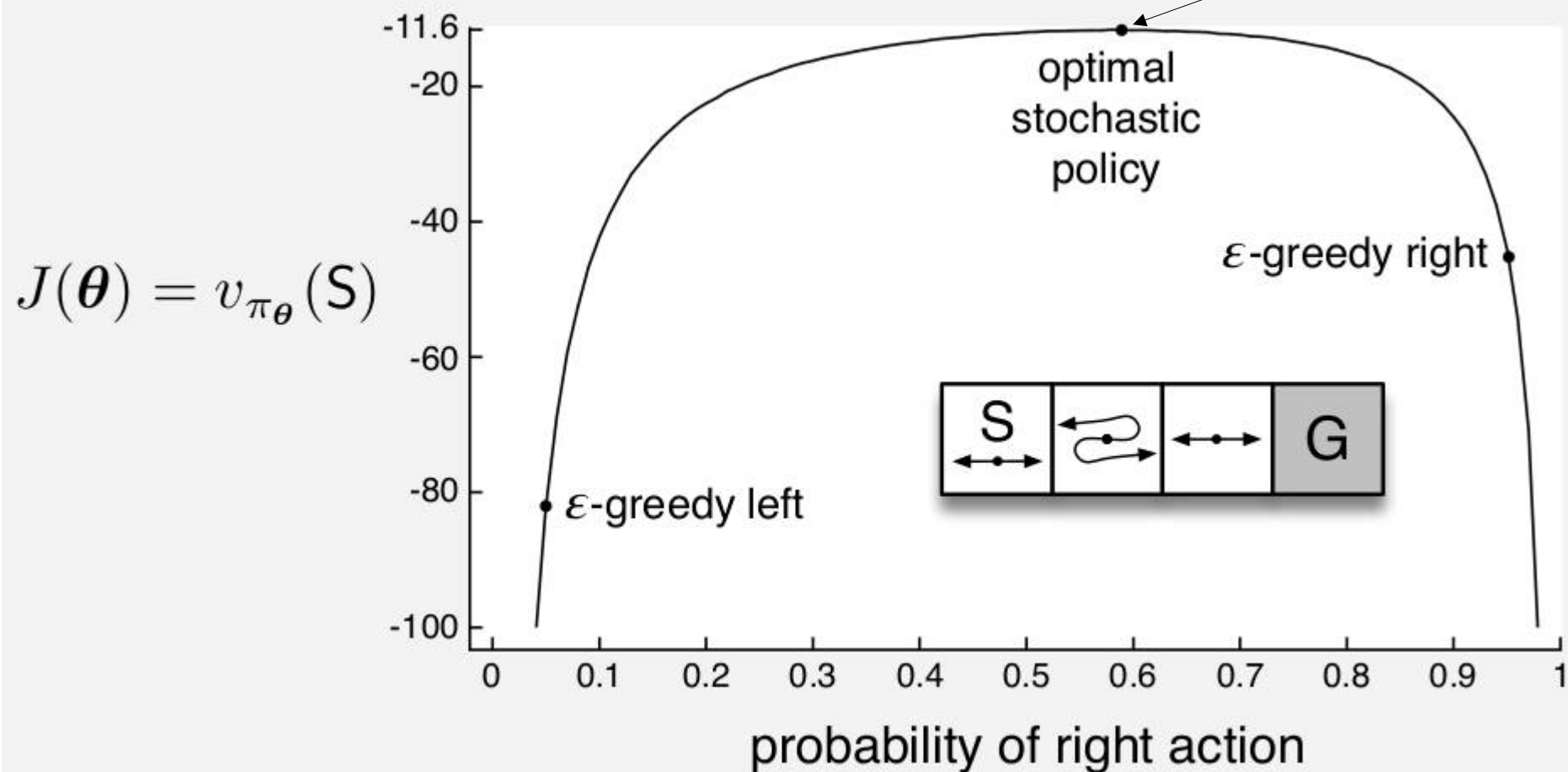
Policy Approximation and its Advantages

Advantages of policy parametrization vs action value parametrization:

- The **policy** may be a **simpler** function to approximate
- Policy parametrization **allows to inject prior knowledge**: this is **often the most important reason** to use for using a policy-based learning method
- **Action-value** methods have no natural way of finding **stochastic policies**, while **policy gradient** methods (e.g., with soft-max in action preferences) enables the selection of actions with **arbitrary probabilities** (e.g., **stochastic policies**)
- **Policy-based methods** can deal with **continuous action spaces**

Example: Short corridor with switched actions

- **Reward:** -1 per step
- **Actions:** left, right
- **State features:**
 - $x(s, \text{right}) = [1, 0]^T$
 - $x(s, \text{left}) = [0, 1]^T$for all states s
- **Action value method:** 2 possible policies
 - 1. Right with probability $(1-\epsilon)/2$
 - 2. Left with probability $(1-\epsilon)/2$
- **Policy gradient method:**
 - **Best probability to select right: 0.59**



The Policy Gradient Theorem

The Policy Gradient Theorem

- With **continuous policy parametrization** the action **probabilities change smoothly** as a function of parameters, instead in **action value methods** with ϵ -greedy selection action **probabilities may change dramatically** for small changes of action values
- Because of this, **stronger convergence guarantees are available for policy gradient methods**
- Given the **performance** of the episodic case $J(\theta) \doteq v_{\pi_\theta}(s_0)$ and assuming **no discounting** (i.e., $\gamma = 1$)
- **How can we change the policy parameters in a way that ensure improvement?**
- Performance depends on both **action selection** and **distribution of states** and both are affected by the policy parameters

The Policy Gradient Theorem

Given a **state**:

- The effect of **policy parameters** on **actions** and therefore **reward** can be computed
- The effect of the **policy** on the **state distribution** is a function of the environment which is typically **unknown** (we are in a model-free setting) -> **Problem!**

- **Question:** How can we estimate the **performance gradient** w.r.t. the **policy parameters** when the gradient **depends** on the **unknown** effect of policy changes on the **state distribution**?
- The **Policy Gradient Theorem** answers to this question with an **analytic expression for the gradient of the performance w.r.t. policy parameter that does not involve the derivative of the state distribution**

The Policy Gradient Theorem

The **Policy Gradient Theorem** for the **episodic case** establishes that:

$$\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta}) \propto \sum_s \mu(s) \sum_a q_{\pi}(s, a) \nabla \pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta})$$

where the **gradients** are column vectors of partial derivatives w.r.t. the components of $\boldsymbol{\theta}$ and $\mu(s)$ is the **on-policy state distribution** under policy π (parametrized by $\boldsymbol{\theta}$)

- The **constant of proportionality** is
 - the **average length of an episode** in the episodic case
 - **1** in the continuing case
- Proof: page 325 of the book

The Policy Gradient Theorem (proof)

$$\begin{aligned}\nabla v_\pi(s) &= \nabla \left[\sum_a \pi(a|s) q_\pi(s, a) \right], \quad \text{for all } s \in \mathcal{S} && \text{(Exercise 3.18)} \\ &= \sum_a \left[\nabla \pi(a|s) q_\pi(s, a) + \pi(a|s) \nabla q_\pi(s, a) \right] && \text{(product rule of calculus)} \\ &= \sum_a \left[\nabla \pi(a|s) q_\pi(s, a) + \pi(a|s) \nabla \sum_{s', r} p(s', r | s, a) (r + v_\pi(s')) \right] \\ &&& \text{(Exercise 3.19 and Equation 3.2)} \\ &= \sum_a \left[\nabla \pi(a|s) q_\pi(s, a) + \pi(a|s) \sum_{s'} p(s' | s, a) \nabla v_\pi(s') \right] && \text{(Eq. 3.4)} \\ &= \sum_a \left[\nabla \pi(a|s) q_\pi(s, a) + \pi(a|s) \sum_{s'} p(s' | s, a) \right. && \text{(unrolling)} \\ &\quad \left. \sum_{a'} [\nabla \pi(a' | s') q_\pi(s', a') + \pi(a' | s') \sum_{s''} p(s'' | s', a') \nabla v_\pi(s'')] \right] \\ &= \sum_{x \in \mathcal{S}} \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \text{Pr}(s \rightarrow x, k, \pi) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|x) q_\pi(x, a),\end{aligned}$$

Where $\text{Pr}(s \rightarrow x, k, \pi)$ is the probability of transitioning from state s to state x in k steps under policy π

The Policy Gradient Theorem (proof)

$$\begin{aligned}\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta}) &= \nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) \\&= \sum_s \left(\sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \Pr(s_0 \rightarrow s, k, \pi) \right) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a) \\&= \sum_s \eta(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a) && \text{(box page 199)} \\&= \sum_{s'} \eta(s') \sum_s \frac{\eta(s)}{\sum_{s'} \eta(s')} \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a) \\&= \sum_{s'} \eta(s') \sum_s \mu(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a) && \text{(Eq. 9.3)} \\&\propto \sum_s \mu(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a) && \text{(Q.E.D.)}\end{aligned}$$

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

- Given the strategy of **stochastic gradient ascent** seen at the beginning

$$\theta_{t+1} = \theta_t + \alpha \widehat{\nabla J(\theta_t)}$$

we need a way to obtain **samples** such that the **expectation** of the sample gradient $\widehat{\nabla J(\theta_t)}$ is **proportional** to the **actual gradient** $\nabla J(\theta_t)$

- The **policy gradient theorem** provides an **exact expression proportional to the gradient**, hence **we use it for sampling** from that expression

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

- We have that $\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta}) \propto \sum_s \mu(s) \sum_a q_\pi(s, a) \nabla \pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta})$
$$= \mathbb{E}_\pi \left[\sum_a q_\pi(S_t, a) \nabla \pi(a|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}) \right]$$

since following π the states are encountered according to distribution $\mu(s)$

- Then, we can instantiate a **first stochastic gradient-ascent algorithm** as

$$\boldsymbol{\theta}_{t+1} \doteq \boldsymbol{\theta}_t + \alpha \underbrace{\sum_a \hat{q}(S_t, a, \mathbf{w}) \nabla \pi(a|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})}_{\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}$$

where \hat{q} is some **learned approximation** of q_π

- We call this algorithm **all-actions** because its update involves all of the actions

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

- If we consider instead **only the action A_t taken at time t** we obtain the **REINFORCE algorithm**
- To derive it we first take the last formula of the gradient $\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta})$ and multiply and divide the summed terms by $\pi(a|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})$

$$\begin{aligned}\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta}) &= \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[\sum_a \boxed{\pi(a|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})} q_{\pi}(S_t, a) \frac{\nabla \pi(a|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})}{\boxed{\pi(a|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})}} \right] \\ &= \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[q_{\pi}(S_t, A_t) \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})}{\pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})} \right] \\ &= \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[G_t \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})}{\pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})} \right],\end{aligned}$$

As done with s in the previous slide

(replacing a by the sample $A_t \sim \pi$)

(because $\mathbb{E}_{\pi}[G_t|S_t, A_t] = q_{\pi}(S_t, A_t)$)

where G_t is the **return**, as usual

- The **final expression** is what we need: **a quantity that can be sampled on each time step, whose expectation is equal to the gradient**

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

- The parameter **update rule of the REINFORCE algorithm** is therefore:

$$\theta_{t+1} \doteq \theta_t + \alpha G_t \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \theta_t)}{\pi(A_t|S_t, \theta_t)}$$

- Idea:** each increment is a product of a return G_t and the vector $\frac{\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \theta_t)}{\pi(A_t|S_t, \theta_t)}$
- Vector $\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \theta_t)$ is the **direction in the parameter space that most increases the probability of repeating the action A_t of future visits of state S_t**
- The update **increases the parameter vector in this direction proportional to the return and inversely proportional to the action probability**



Causes the parameters to move most in the direction that favour highest returns



Remove advantage of actions selected most frequently, they could not bring the highest return

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

- REINFORCE uses the **complete return** G_t from time t (i.e., all rewards until the end of the episode)
- REINFORCE is a **Monte Carlo algorithm** and it is well defined for the **episodic** case

REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient (Williams 1992)

REINFORCE: Monte-Carlo Policy-Gradient Control (episodic) for π_*

Input: a differentiable policy parameterization $\pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta})$

Algorithm parameter: step size $\alpha > 0$

Initialize policy parameter $\boldsymbol{\theta} \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$ (e.g., to $\mathbf{0}$)

Loop forever (for each episode):

Generate an episode $S_0, A_0, R_1, \dots, S_{T-1}, A_{T-1}, R_T$, following $\pi(\cdot|\cdot, \boldsymbol{\theta})$

Loop for each step of the episode $t = 0, 1, \dots, T - 1$:

$$G \leftarrow \sum_{k=t+1}^T \gamma^{k-t-1} R_k \quad (G_t)$$

$$\boldsymbol{\theta} \leftarrow \boldsymbol{\theta} + \alpha \gamma^t G \nabla \ln \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})$$

$$\nabla \ln \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t) = \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}{\pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}$$

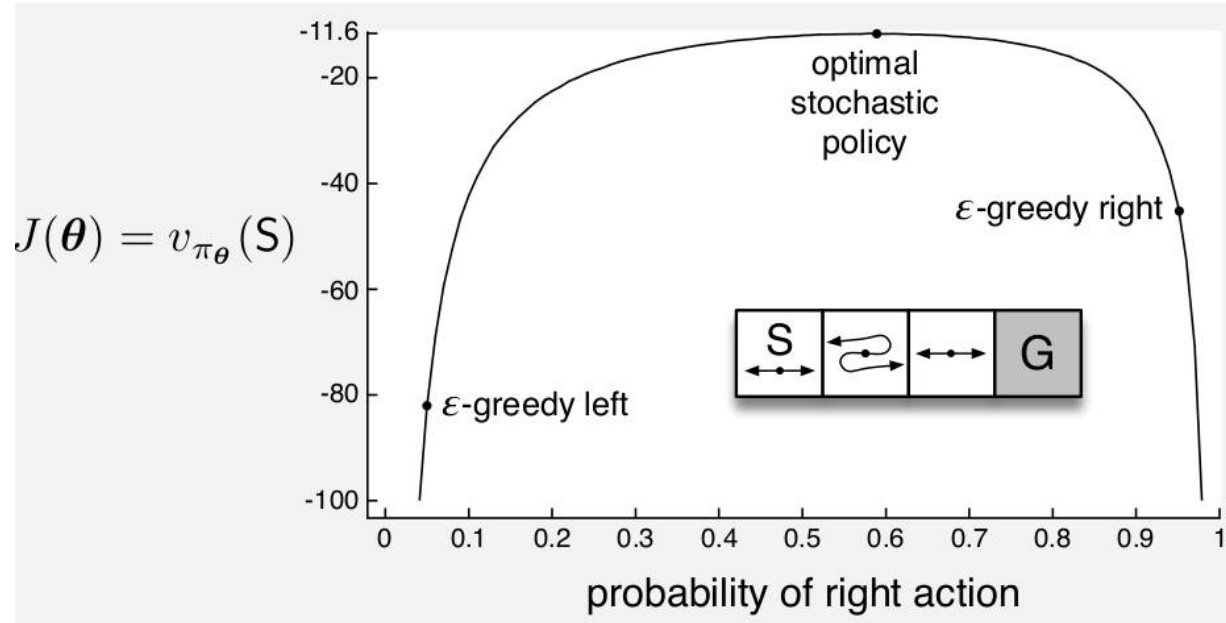
$$\text{since } \nabla \ln x = \frac{\nabla x}{x}$$

This holds for the general discount case with γ

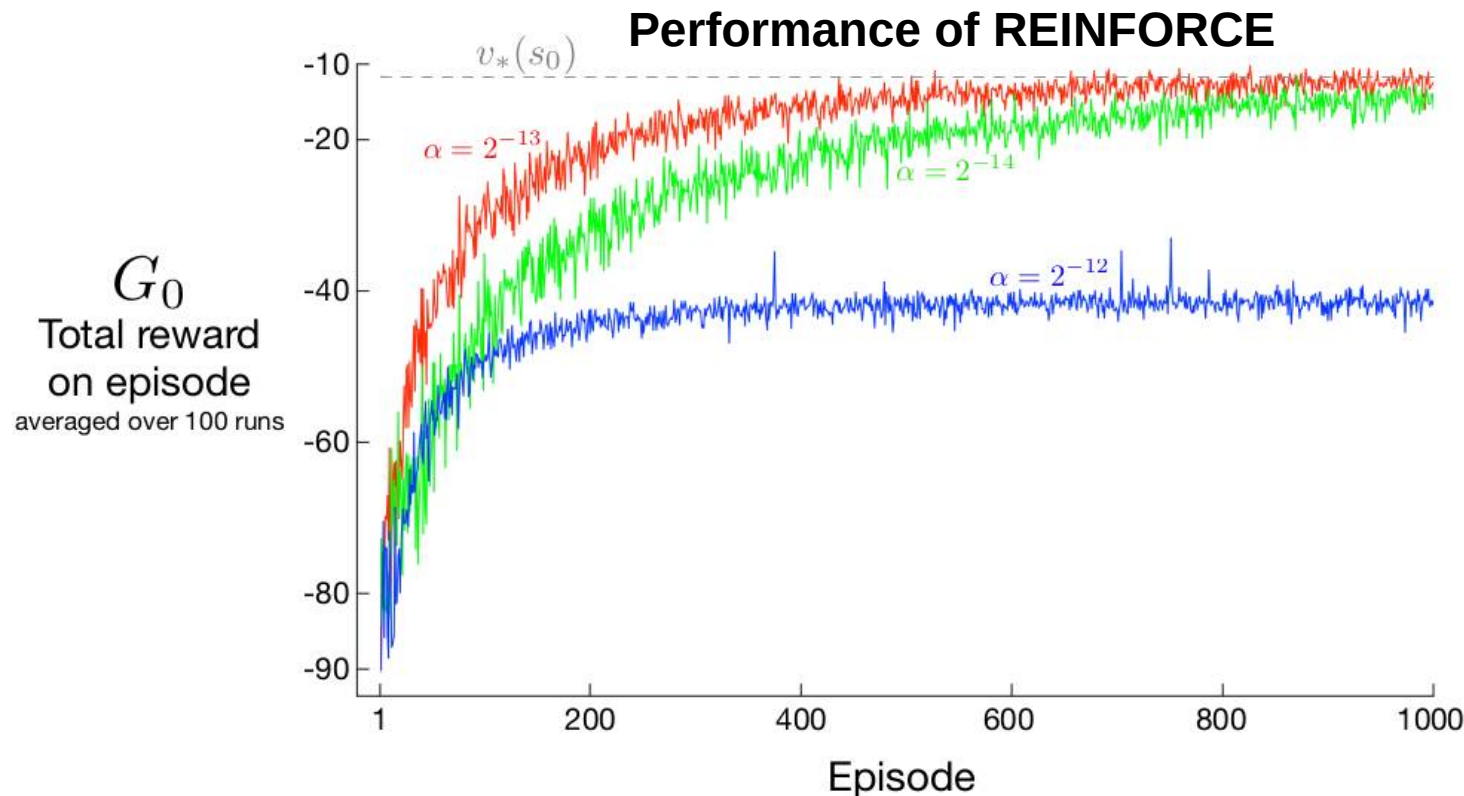
REINFORCE: Monte Carlo Policy Gradient

- REINFORCE has **good theoretical convergence properties**
- The expected update over an episode is in the same direction as the performance gradient
- This assures **improvement of expected performance** for sufficiently **small** α and **convergence to a local optimum** under standard stochastic approximation conditions (Ch. 2 Sutton and Barto) for decreasing α
- As a **Monte Carlo** method REINFORCE **may** be of **high variance** and thus produce **slow learning**

Example: Short corridor with switched actions with REINFORCE



- Reward: -1 per step
- Actions: left, right
- All the states appear identical under the function approximation (model free RL)
- $\mathbf{x}(s, \text{right}) = [1, 0]^\top$ Features for all states
 $\mathbf{x}(s, \text{left}) = [0, 1]^\top$



REINFORCE with Baseline

REINFORCE with Baseline

- The **policy gradient theorem** can be **generalized** to **include a comparison of the action value to an arbitrary baseline $b(s)$**

$$\nabla J(\boldsymbol{\theta}) \propto \sum_s \mu(s) \sum_a \left(q_\pi(s, a) - b(s) \right) \nabla \pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta})$$

- The equation remains valid **if the baseline does not vary with a** because the subtracted quantity is zero:

$$\sum_a b(s) \nabla \pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta}) = b(s) \nabla \sum_a \pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta}) = b(s) \nabla 1 = 0$$

- A new version of **REINFORCE** can be derived using the **update rule** that includes a general **baseline**:

$$\boldsymbol{\theta}_{t+1} \doteq \boldsymbol{\theta}_t + \alpha \left(G_t - b(S_t) \right) \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}{\pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}$$

REINFORCE with Baseline

- The baseline leaves the expected value of the update unchanged
- But it can have a **positive effect on the variance**
- **The baseline can vary with the state**
 - In some states all actions have high values → **high baseline** to differentiate the higher valued actions from the less highly valued ones
 - In other states all actions have low values → **low baseline** is appropriate
- One **natural choice** for the baseline is an **estimate** of the **state value** $\hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w})$ where \mathbf{w} is learned with **value based methods**
- If we use **Monte Carlo** to learn **both** \mathbf{w} and θ we obtain the following algorithm

REINFORCE with Baseline

REINFORCE with Baseline (episodic), for estimating $\pi_{\theta} \approx \pi_*$

Input: a differentiable policy parameterization $\pi(a|s, \theta)$

Input: a differentiable state-value function parameterization $\hat{v}(s, \mathbf{w})$

Algorithm parameters: step sizes $\alpha^{\theta} > 0$, $\alpha^{\mathbf{w}} > 0$

Initialize policy parameter $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$ and state-value weights $\mathbf{w} \in \mathbb{R}^d$ (e.g., to $\mathbf{0}$)

Loop forever (for each episode):

Generate an episode $S_0, A_0, R_1, \dots, S_{T-1}, A_{T-1}, R_T$, following $\pi(\cdot|\cdot, \theta)$

Loop for each step of the episode $t = 0, 1, \dots, T - 1$:

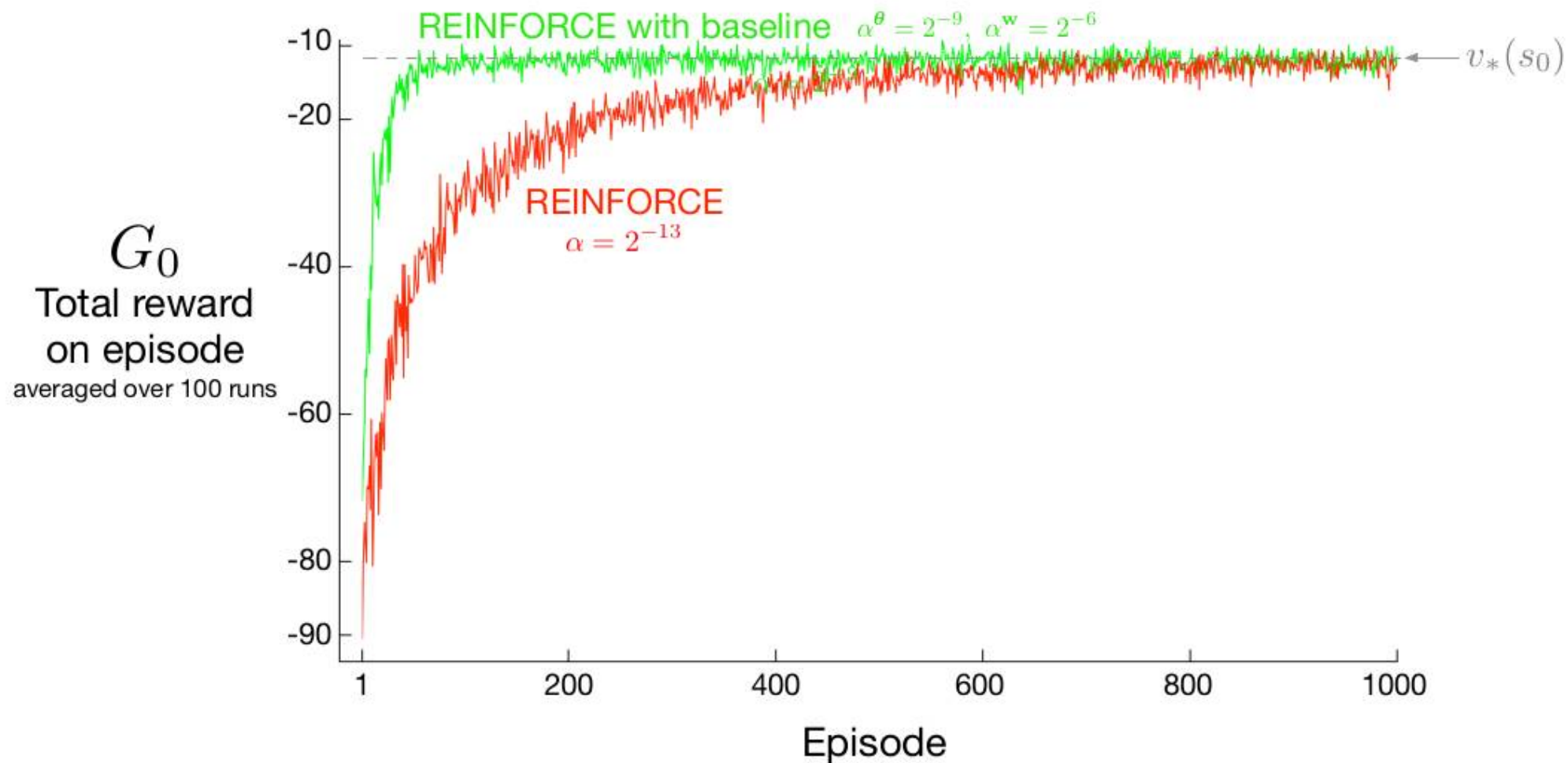
$$G \leftarrow \sum_{k=t+1}^T \gamma^{k-t-1} R_k \quad (G_t)$$

$$\delta \leftarrow G - \hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w})$$

$$\mathbf{w} \leftarrow \mathbf{w} + \alpha^{\mathbf{w}} \delta \nabla \hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w}) \longrightarrow \text{See Eq. 9.7 of the book}$$

$$\theta \leftarrow \theta + \alpha^{\theta} \gamma^t \delta \nabla \ln \pi(A_t | S_t, \theta)$$

REINFORCE with Baseline



Actor-Critic Methods

- **REINFORCE-with-baseline** learns both:
 - A **policy**
 - A **state-value** function (i.e., the baseline)
- However, we do **not** consider it an **actor-critic** method, because the **state-value function** is **not** used as a **critic**
- The value-function is **not used for bootstrapping**, namely, for **updating the value estimate for a state** from the **estimated values of subsequent states**
- It is used only as a **baseline** for the **state** whose estimate is being updated

- As seen before, the bias introduced by bootstrapping is often beneficial because it reduces variance and accelerate learning
- **REINFORCE with baseline** is **unbiased** and converges asymptotically to a local minimum
- **Monte-Carlo methods** tend to learn slowly (estimates have high variance) and to be inconvenient to implement online or for continuing problems
- **Temporal-Difference methods** can eliminate these inconveniences
- To gain advantages of TD in policy gradient methods we introduce
- **Actor-Critic methods with a Bootstrapping critic**

Actor-Critic Methods

- **One-step actor-critic methods** are the **policy-gradient analog** of the TD methods introduced before, i.e., **TD, Sarsa, Q-learning**
- They are fully online and incremental
- They **replace** the **full return** of REINFORCE with the **one-step-return** and use a learned state-value function as the baseline
- The update rule becomes:

$$\begin{aligned}\boldsymbol{\theta}_{t+1} &\doteq \boldsymbol{\theta}_t + \alpha \left(\overset{\text{Target}}{\boxed{G_{t:t+1}}} - \overset{\text{Baseline}}{\boxed{\hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w})}} \right) \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t | S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}{\pi(A_t | S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)} \\ &= \boldsymbol{\theta}_t + \alpha \left(\boxed{R_{t+1} + \gamma \hat{v}(S_{t+1}, \mathbf{w})} - \hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w}) \right) \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t | S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}{\pi(A_t | S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)} \\ &= \boldsymbol{\theta}_t + \alpha \delta_t \frac{\nabla \pi(A_t | S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}{\pi(A_t | S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta}_t)}.\end{aligned}$$

Update rule of REINFORCE with baseline

Actor-Critic Methods

- The natural way to **learn the state-value function** in this context is **semi-gradient TD(0)** (see methods for On-policy prediction with approximation)

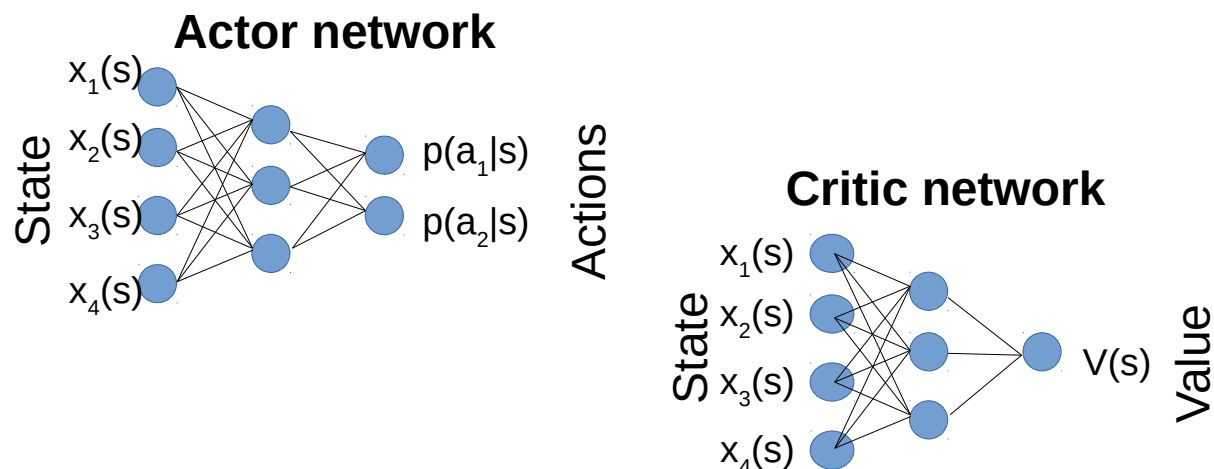
- $\pi(A_t|S_t, \theta_t)$: actor

- $\hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w})$: critic

- $R_{t+1} + \gamma \hat{v}(S_{t+1}, \mathbf{w})$: target

- $R_{t+1} + \gamma \hat{v}(S_{t+1}, \mathbf{w}) - \hat{v}(S_t, \mathbf{w})$: **advantage** (=TD error)

- The **advantage** tells us if a state is better or worse than expected. If the action is better than expected (advantage > 0) then we want to encourage this action. Otherwise (advantage < 0) we want to encourage the opposite action



Actor-Critic Methods

- The natural way to **learn the state-value function** in this context is **semi-gradient TD(0)** (see methods for On-policy prediction with approximation)

One-step Actor–Critic (episodic), for estimating $\pi_{\theta} \approx \pi_*$ (A2C)

Input: a differentiable policy parameterization $\pi(a|s, \theta)$

Input: a differentiable state-value function parameterization $\hat{v}(s, \mathbf{w})$

Parameters: step sizes $\alpha^{\theta} > 0$, $\alpha^{\mathbf{w}} > 0$

Initialize policy parameter $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$ and state-value weights $\mathbf{w} \in \mathbb{R}^d$ (e.g., to $\mathbf{0}$)

Loop forever (for each episode):

 Initialize S (first state of episode)

$I \leftarrow 1$

 Loop while S is not terminal (for each time step):

$A \sim \pi(\cdot|S, \theta)$

 Take action A , observe S', R

$\delta \leftarrow R + \gamma \hat{v}(S', \mathbf{w}) - \hat{v}(S, \mathbf{w})$

$\mathbf{w} \leftarrow \mathbf{w} + \alpha^{\mathbf{w}} \delta \nabla \hat{v}(S, \mathbf{w})$

$\theta \leftarrow \theta + \alpha^{\theta} I \delta \nabla \ln \pi(A|S, \theta)$

$I \leftarrow \gamma I$

$S \leftarrow S'$

(if S' is terminal, then $\hat{v}(S', \mathbf{w}) \doteq 0$)

References

- R. S. Sutton, A. G. Barto. Reinforcement learning, An Introduction. Second edition. Chapter 13