

Reinforcement Learning: An Introduction

Attempted Solutions

Chapter 3

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1 Exercise 3.1

Devise three example tasks of your own that fit into the MDP framework, identifying for each its states, actions, and rewards. Make the three examples as *different* from each other as possible. The framework is abstract and flexible and can be applied in many different ways. Stretch its limits in some way in at least one of your examples.

An e-commerce site could use reinforcement learning to control daily pricing of products. The actions would be the prices set for each product on each day. The states might include the month of the year, the day of the week and the proximity to special days such as Christmas and Valentine's Day. The reward would be the profit at the end of each day.

The manager of a football team could use reinforcement learning to pick the 11 players to play each game. The actions would be the team selection. The states could be the opponent, whether the game is home or away and the fitness of the players. The reward would be 0, 1 or 3 depending on whether the team lost, drew or won the game.

A company could use reinforcement learning to control the air temperature in its office. The actions would be the specific settings of the heating/air-conditioning system. The states would include the current outdoor temperature and the indoor temperature in each room in the building. The reward would be the satisfaction of the employees, which could be measured by selecting 10 employees at random every hour and asking them to rate their comfort on a scale of 1 to 10 and then averaging the ratings.

2 Exercise 3.2

Is the MDP framework adequate to usefully represent all goal-directed learning tasks? Can you think of any clear exceptions?

The MDP framework “proposes that whatever the details of the sensory, memory, and control apparatus, and whatever objective one is trying to achieve, any problem of learning goal-directed behavior can be reduced to three signals passing back and forth between an agent and its environment: one signal to represent the choices made by the agent (the actions), one signal to represent the basis on which the choices are made (the states), and one signal to define the agent's goal (the rewards).”

One exception could be tasks for which actions are regularly taken but we only know if the goal has ultimately been achieved at some distant point in the future.

Consider the example of a government that would like to learn to set political policies with the goal of ensuring that 90% of all children born in 2020 live beyond 2100. Each year the government would review health statistics (the states) and decide which political policies to implement (the

actions). In the MDP framework, at the end of each year the government would receive a reward, given the state and action selected at the end of the previous year. However, how do we define this yearly reward given that we will only know if the government has ultimately achieved its goal in 2100?

One idea might be to define the reward at the end of year n as the life expectancy in year n . However, maximising life expectancy in the current year does not necessarily increase the chance of a child living until 2100. For example, a policy might be introduced which favours the elderly but has a negative impact on the younger generation.

3 Exercise 3.3

Consider the problem of driving. You could define the actions in terms of the accelerator, steering wheel, and brake, that is, where your body meets the machine. Or you could define them farther out—say, where the rubber meets the road, considering your actions to be tire torques. Or you could define them farther in—say, where your brain meets your body, the actions being muscle twitches to control your limbs. Or you could go to a really high level and say that your actions are your choices of *where* to drive. What is the right level, the right place to draw the line between agent and environment? On what basis is one location of the line to be preferred over another? Is there any fundamental reason for preferring one location over another, or is it a free choice?

As stated in this chapter, “the agent-environment boundary represents the limit of the agent’s absolute control”. In this example it would appear that the limit of the agent’s absolute control is where the body meets the machine. Therefore, we would define the actions in terms of the accelerator, steering wheel and brake. When driving a car the driver has full control over these apparatus, assuming that nothing jams.

Farther out, where the rubber meets the road, we probably do not have absolute control. For example, the torque applied to the tyres may depend on the condition of the car or even the weather. It is unlikely that pressing the accelerator to a given angle always results in exactly the same torque. At an even higher level, such as the specification of *where* to drive, we certainly do not have absolute control.

Farther in, we do have absolute control over our own limbs, but this boundary is not on the limit of absolute control and defining actions as muscle twitches would appear to be overkill.

4 Exercise 3.4

5 Exercise 3.5

The equations in Section 3.1 are for the continuing case and need to be modified (very slightly) to apply to episodic tasks. Show that you know the modifications needed by giving the modified version of (3.3).

We need to add the terminal state to the possible next states:

$$\sum_{s' \in \mathcal{S}^+} \sum_{r \in \mathcal{R}} p(s', r | s, a) = 1, \text{ for all } s \in \mathcal{S}, a \in \mathcal{A}(s).$$

6 Exercise 3.6

Suppose you treated pole-balancing as an episodic task but also used discounting, with all rewards zero except for -1 upon failure. What then would the return be at each time? How does this return differ from that in the discounted, continuing formulation of this task?

Suppose that failure occurs on time step T . Then the reward at time step t is

$$G_t = R_{t+1} + \gamma R_{t+2} + \gamma^2 R_{t+3} + \cdots + \gamma^{T-t-1} R_T = -\gamma^{T-t-1}.$$

In the discounted, continuing formulation of this task the reward received at each time step not only depends on the rewards of subsequent time steps in the same episode, but also time steps in all subsequent episodes. Suppose that failure occurs on time step T_i during episode i for $i = 1, 2, 3, \dots$. Then the reward at time step t of episode j is

$$G_{j,t} = -\gamma^{T_j-t-1} - \gamma^{T_{j+1}+T_j-t-1} - \gamma^{T_{j+2}+T_{j+1}+T_j-t-1} - \dots$$

7 Exercise 3.7

Imagine that you are designing a robot to run a maze. You decide to give it a reward of $+1$ for escaping from the maze and a reward of zero at all other times. The task seems to break down naturally into episodes—the successive runs through the maze—so you decide to treat it as an episodic task, where the goal is to maximize expected total reward (3.7). After running the learning agent for a while, you find that it is showing no improvement in escaping from the maze. What is going wrong? Have you effectively communicated to the agent what you want it to achieve?

The reward on each time step will be 1, regardless of how long it takes the agent to escape. As we only give the robot a reward of $+1$ on the final time step, it has no incentive to escape on the 10th time step as opposed to the 1000th time step. Assuming that we want the robot to escape quickly, a much better idea would be to give it a reward of -1 on each time step that is it inside the maze.

8 Exercise 3.8

Suppose $\gamma = 0.5$ and the following sequence of rewards is received: $R_1 = 1$, $R_2 = 2$, $R_3 = 6$, $R_4 = 3$, and $R_5 = 2$, with $T = 5$. What are G_0, G_1, \dots, G_5 ? Hint: Work backwards.

We have

$$\begin{aligned} G_5 &= 0, \\ G_4 &= R_5 = 2, \\ G_3 &= R_4 + \gamma G_4 = 3 + 0.5 \cdot 2 = 4, \\ G_2 &= R_3 + \gamma G_3 = 6 + 0.5 \cdot 4 = 8, \\ G_1 &= R_2 + \gamma G_2 = 2 + 0.5 \cdot 8 = 6, \\ G_0 &= R_1 + \gamma G_1 = 1 + 0.5 \cdot 6 = 4. \end{aligned}$$

9 Exercise 3.9

Suppose $\gamma = 0.9$ and the reward sequence is $R_1 = 2$ followed by an infinite sequence of 7s. What are G_1 and G_0 ?

We have

$$\begin{aligned} G_1 &= \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k R_{k+2} \\ &= \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} 0.9^k \cdot 7 \\ &= 7 \cdot \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} 0.9^k \\ &= \frac{7}{1 - 0.9} \\ &= 70 \end{aligned}$$

and

$$G_0 = R_1 + \gamma G_1 = 2 + 0.9 \cdot 70 = 65.$$

10 Exercise 3.10

Prove the second equality in (3.10).

We have

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k &= 1 + \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \gamma^k \\ &= 1 + \gamma \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k \\ \iff (1 - \gamma) \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k &= 1 \\ \iff \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \gamma^k &= \frac{1}{1 - \gamma}. \end{aligned}$$