MS Thesis Defense: Non-Stationary MDPs and Continual Reinforcement Learning Algorithms

SANDESH KATAKAM - BS MS 2020

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IISER Berhampur, 28/04/2025

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A Brief History of RL

- ▶ Reinforcement Learning has over 70 years of rich academic history.
- ► Its origins trace back to the 1950s, rooted in early studies of Markov Decision Processes (MDPs).
- MDPs formalize sequential decision-making under uncertainty.
- ► MDPs are discrete, stochastic analogs of optimal control problems, closely related to Hamilton–Jacobi–Bellman (HJB) equations.

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Success of Reinforcement Learning: AlphaGo 2016

AlphaGo(2016 Seoul South Korea)



Figure: Lee Sedol against AlphaGo

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MuZero 2019(Schrittwieser et al., Nov 2019)



MuZero: Mastering Go, chess, shogi and Atari without rules

oannis Antonoglou, Thomas Hubert, Karen Simonyan, Laurent Sifne, Simon Schmitt, Arthur Guez, Edward Lockhart, Demi Massahib: Thora Graenal Timothur (Biroso, Dudd Silver

< Share



Success of Reinforcement Learning: 2024 ACM Turing Award



But the Problem is...

Mila, McGill University, DeepMind

Still a lot of problems in RL are not solved yet!! Along the direction of tasks scalability we have one such problem: Non-stationarity and Continual learning of tasks

Towards Continual Reinforcement Learning: A Review and Perspectives

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Mila, McGill University
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Abstract

In this article, we aim to provide a literature review of different formulations and approaches to continual reinforcement learning (RL), also known as lifelong or non-stationary RL. We begin by discussing our perspective on why RL is a natural fit for studying continual learning. We then provide a taxonomy of different continual RL formulations by mathematically characterizing two low properties of non-stationarity, namely the second

A Definition of Continual Reinforcement Learning

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Abstract

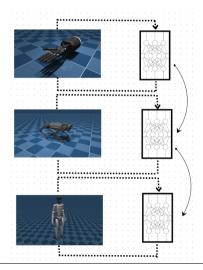
In a standard view of the reinforcement learning problem, an agent's goal is to efficiently identify a policy that maximizes long-term reward. However, this perspective is based on a restricted view of learning as finding a solution, rather than treating learning as endless adaptation. In contrast, continual reinforcement learning refers to the setting in which the best agents never stop learning. Despite

Figure: On Left: Khetarpal et al. (2022), On Right: Abel et al. (2023)

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Motivation: Why Continual RL?

- ▶ In real-world scenarios, agents face a sequence of tasks — not a fixed one.
- ► This leads to **non-stationarity** in dynamics, rewards, and data distribution.
- Examples:
 - ► A robot learning new skills across environments.
 - ► A recommendation system adapting to evolving user preferences.
 - ► An autonomous agent navigating changing traffic or weather.



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Continual RL Problem Setting

(General CRL Problem \mathcal{M}_{CRL}):^a

Given a state S, action-space A, an observation space O, a reward function $r: SxA \to R$, a transition function $p: SxA \to S$, and an observation function $x: S \to O$, the most general continual reinforcement learning problem problem can be expressed as

$$\mathcal{M}_{\mathit{CRL}} = \langle \mathcal{S}(t), \mathcal{A}(t), r(t), p(t), x(t), \mathcal{O}(t) \rangle$$

where each component of the problem formulation can be considered as a non-stationary function of form f(i, t) where i is the input specific to each component.

Assumptions for Non-stationary Functional Form f(i,t): Lipschitz Continuity and Piecewise Non-stationarity

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^aKhetarpal et.al 2022, Towards Continual Reinforcement Learning: A Review and Perspectives

The Non-Stationarity Problem

Definition(Non-stationary MDPs)

Non-stationary MDP as a special type of CRL Problem:^a

where scope of non-stationarity i.e. $\alpha \subseteq \{S, A, r, p\}$, the observation function is an appropriate identity matrix $x = \mathcal{I}$ and the observation space is the state space $\mathcal{O} = \mathcal{S}$

$$\mathcal{M}_{\mathit{CRL}} = \langle \mathcal{S}(t), \mathcal{A}(t), \mathit{r}(t), \mathit{p}(t)
angle$$

^aKhetarpal et.al 2022, Towards Continual Reinforcement Learning: A Review and Perspectives

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Scoping in..

Based on the scope of Non-stationary (α) which defines what elements have non-stationarity¹

$$\alpha \subseteq \{S, A, r, p, x, O\}$$

For our problem setting, we assume the scope includes transition function p and reward function r. So.

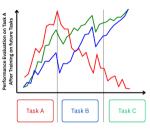
$$\mathcal{M}_{\mathit{CRL}} = \langle \mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, r(t), p(t)
angle$$

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¹Khetarpal et.al 2022, Towards Continual Reinforcement Learning: A Review and Perspectives

Core Challenges in Continual RL

- ▶ Forward Transfer: how pre-training on an earlier task \mathcal{T}_i speeds up convergence on a later task \mathcal{T}_j
- ▶ Backward Transfer: how learning task T_j improves performance on a previous task T_i
- Catastrophic Forgetting: drop in performance on earlier tasks T_i after training sequentially up to T_t



Catastrophic Foregtting: Past task performance drops after learning new tasks.

Forward Transfer : Prior learning helps faster learning on new tasks.

Backward Transfer: Learning new tasks improves earlier task performance.

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²Wang et.al 2023, A Comprehensive Survey of Continual Learning: Theory, Method and Application

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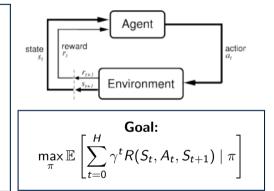
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Markov Decision Process

An MDP is defined by:

- Set of states S
- Set of actions A
- Transition function $P(s' \mid s, a)$
- Reward function R(s, a, s')
- Start state s₀
- ▶ Discount factor γ
- ► Horizon H



Optimal Control: Given an MDP (S, A, P, R, γ, H) , Find an optimal policy $\pi * ^3$

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³Deep RL Bootcamp 2017 by Pieter Abbeel , UC Berkeley

Bellman Equations and Related Terms

Value function for a state s

$$\mathcal{V}^*(s) = \max_{\pi} \mathbb{E}\left[\left.\sum_{t=0}^{H} \gamma^t \mathcal{R}(s_t, a_t, s_{t+1}) \,\right| \,\, \pi, s_0 = s
ight]$$

= sum of discounted rewards when starting from state s and acting optimally

But knowing the value of a state is not enough if we also need to know which action to take

Instead of just states, what if we assign values to (state, action) pairs?

$$\mathcal{Q}^*(s, a) = \max_{\pi} \mathbb{E} \left[\Sigma_{t=0}^H \gamma^t \mathcal{R}(s_t, a_t, s_{t-1}) \mid s_0 = s, a_0 = a, \pi
ight]$$

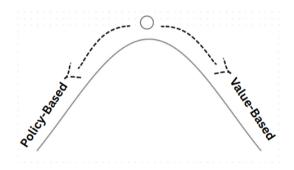
tell us how good it is to take action a at state s and then act optimally

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Broad Taxonomy of RL Algorithms

Depending on the quantity we choose to optimize, reinforcement-learning algorithms fall into two main classes:

- ▶ Value-based methods, which learn an action-value function Q(s, a).
- Policy-based methods, which directly optimize a parameterized policy π_{θ} to maximize the expected return.



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Introducing Q-Learning

Bellman Equations for Q^* : Optimal action-values must satisfy a recursive relationship...

$$Q^* = \mathbb{E}[\mathcal{R}(s, a, s') + \gamma \max_{a'} Q^*(s', a')]$$

We don't know Q exactly, but we can learn iteratively by updating estimates based on this recursive formula.

The Q-Learning update rule

$$\mathcal{Q}(s, a) \leftarrow \mathcal{Q}(s, a) + \alpha(r + \gamma \max_{a'} \mathcal{Q}(s', a') - \mathcal{Q}(s, a))$$

This gives us the direct way to estimate Q-values without knowing the model of the environment

Limitations: We cannot store all Q-values in a table for every state-action pair in large state-action spaces

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Deep Q-Learning(Mnih et al., 2013)

Motivation: We need a way to **generalize** Q-values across similar states. Neural networks are a good choice of function approximations for Q-values.

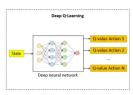
In Deep Q-Learning, given a state *s*, a neural network outputs Q-values for all actions.

 ${\mathcal Q}$ is parameterized by a neural network with weights θ

Training using this objective:

$$\mathcal{L}(\theta) = (r + \gamma \max_{a'} \mathcal{Q}(s', a'; \theta^{-}) - \mathcal{Q}(s, a; \theta))^{2}$$





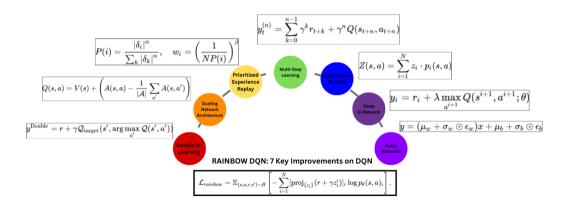
Important Tricks:

- Experience Replay
- ► Target networks

After each training step we use $\mathcal{Q}*$ we implicitly derive the corresponding π^* and use it to sample new actions

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Improving DQN: Rainbow DQN



Hessel et.al 2017, Rainbow: Combining improvements in Deep Reinforcement Learning

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Policy Optimization via Likelihood Ratio Gradient

Policy Optimization Approach:

Rather than computing Q^* first, we directly optimize:

$$\max_{\theta} \mathbb{E}\left[\sum_{t=0}^{H} \mathcal{R}(s_t) \mid \pi_{\theta}\right] \tag{1}$$

where heta parameterizes policy $\pi_{ heta}$

Likelihood Ratio Method:

For trajectory $\tau = (s_0, a_0, ...)$ with return $R(\tau)$:

$$U(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{\tau \sim \pi_{\theta}}[R(\tau)] \tag{2}$$

$$=\sum_{\tau}P(\tau;\theta)R(\tau) \tag{3}$$

Goal: $\max_{\theta} U(\theta)$

This gradient-based approach directly optimizes policy parameters instead of deriving policy from value functions. ⁴

⁴Deep RL Bootcamp 2017 by Pieter Abbeel, UC Berkeley

Likelihood Ratio Policy Gradient (Sutton et al., 1999)

$$U(\theta) = \sum_{\tau} P(\tau; \theta) R(\tau) \tag{4}$$

Taking gradient w.r.t θ :

$$\nabla_{\theta} U(\theta) = \sum_{\tau} \nabla_{\theta} P(\tau; \theta) R(\tau)$$
 (5)

Using the identity:

$$\nabla_{\theta} P(\tau; \theta) = P(\tau; \theta) \nabla_{\theta} \log P(\tau; \theta)$$
 (6)

we get: $\nabla_{\theta} U(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_{\tau \sim \pi_{\theta}} [\nabla_{\theta} \log P(\tau; \theta) R(\tau)]$

Limitations

- High variance in gradient estimates
- Sample inefficient
- Sensitive to step size

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Motivation for Natural Policy Gradient

Problem: The standard policy gradient uses the Euclidean gradient, which is *not invariant* to the parameterization of the policy.

Idea: Use the Natural Gradient, which accounts for the geometry of the policy space.

$$abla_{ heta}^{\mathsf{Natural}} U(heta) = F(heta)^{-1}
abla_{ heta} U(heta)$$

where $F(\theta)$ is the Fisher Information Matrix.

Interpretation: Move in the steepest ascent direction *measured under KL-divergence* rather than Euclidean distance.

Limitations: Still sensitive to step-sizes, No Guarantee of Monotonic improvement towards optimal policy, No Explicit trust region constraints 5

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⁵Kakade et.al 2001, A Natural Policy Gradient

Trust Region Policy Optimization (TRPO) and PPO

TRPO: Solve a constrained optimization:

$$\max_{ heta} \quad \mathbb{E}\left[rac{\pi_{ heta}(a|s)}{\pi_{ heta_{ ext{old}}}(a|s)}A^{\pi_{ heta_{ ext{old}}}}(s,a)
ight]$$

subject to:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[D_{\mathsf{KL}}(\pi_{\theta_{\mathsf{old}}}(\cdot|s)\|\pi_{\theta}(\cdot|s))\right] \leq \delta$$

PPO: Simplifies TRPO by using a **clipped surrogate objective**:

$$\mathcal{L}^{\mathsf{CLIP}}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}\left[\min\left(r(\theta)A, \, \mathsf{clip}(r(\theta), 1 - \epsilon, 1 + \epsilon)A\right)\right]$$

where
$$r(\theta) = \frac{\pi_{\theta}(a|s)}{\pi_{\theta_{\text{old}}}(a|s)}$$
. 6 7

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⁶Schulman et.al 2015, Trust Region Policy Optimization

⁷Schulman et.al 2017, Proximal Policy Optimization Algorithms

Maximum Entropy RL Framework: SAC (Haarnoja et al., 2018)

Motivation: Previous methods (TRPO, PPO) focus on constrained maximization of expected return. SAC(Haarnoja et al., 2018) instead maximizes a soft, entropy-augmented objective for better exploration and robustness.

SAC Objective:

$$\pi^* = rg \max_{\pi} \; \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{H} \gamma^t \left(R(s_t, a_t) + lpha \mathcal{H}(\pi(\cdot|s_t))
ight)
ight]$$

where $\mathcal{H}(\pi(\cdot|s)) = \mathbb{E}_{a \sim \pi(\cdot|s)} \left[-\log \pi(a|s) \right]$ is the policy entropy.

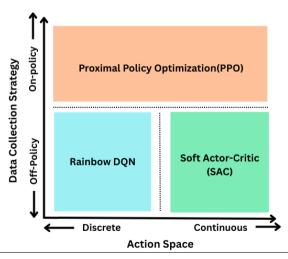
Key Differences:

- ▶ Entropy regularization: encourages *stochastic* policies for exploration.
- Off-policy learning: reuses experience efficiently.
- **Energy-based policies:** policies are learned implicitly via Q-functions.

Result: SAC achieves better sample efficiency and stability in practice.

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The Three Representative Algorithms



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Existing Methods in Continual RL

Continual learning in RL is an relatively less explored than continual learning in other settings (supervised and unsupervised setting).

Examples of some approaches: CLEAR (He and Sick, 2021), Modular Lifelong learning with neural composition(Mendez et al., 2022), Lifelong Reinforcement Learning with Modulating Masks (Ben-Iwhiwhu et al., 2023)



Figure: Taxonomy of Continual RL approaches

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Drawbacks

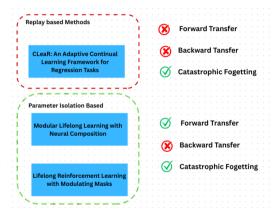


Figure: Strengths and Weaknesses of Existing Methods in Continual RL

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Gradient Interference and Alignment in Continual RL

Gradient Interference: When two task gradients point in conflicting directions, updating on one degrades performance on the other:

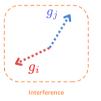
$$\nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_i \cdot \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_i < 0$$

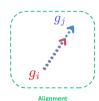
Impact:

- ► Interference ⇒ catastrophic forgetting
- ► Alignment ⇒ continual improvement across tasks

Gradient Alignment: When gradients for different tasks point similarly, updates yield positive transfer:

$$\nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_i \cdot \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_j > 0$$





Here, $g_i = \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_i$ and $g_j = \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_j$

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MAML: Model-Agnostic Meta-Learning

Bi-level Optimization: Inner and Outer Loop Updates

MAML (Finn et al., 2017) Meta-objective:

$$\min_{\theta} \sum_{ au \in \mathcal{T}} \mathcal{L}_{ au}(U^k(\theta)), \quad U(\theta) = \theta - \alpha \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}_{ au}(\theta)$$

Learn a common initialization θ such that k inner-loop gradient steps on task τ minimize its loss.

Inner loop: Task-specific adaptation via SGD. **Outer loop:** Meta-optimization over many tasks.

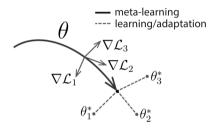


Figure: MAML update scheme showing fast adaptation and meta-update.

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⁸Chelsea Finn et.al 2017 Model-Agnostic Meta-Learning for Fast Adaptation of Deep Networks(ICML 2017)

MAML vs Look-Ahead MAML

Look-Ahead MAML (Gupta et al., 2020)

We seek parameters θ and per-parameter step-sizes α to minimize over tasks $\{\mathcal{T}\}_{i=1}^t$

$$\min_{\theta, \alpha} \; \mathbb{E}_{ au_t} \left[\mathcal{L}_{\mathsf{meta}} \left(U^k(\theta, \alpha; au_t) \right) \right]$$

$$U(\theta, \alpha; \tau) = \theta - \alpha \odot \nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta; \tau).$$

First-order hypergradient:

$$g_{lpha} = rac{\partial L_{\mathsf{meta}}(heta_k)}{\partial lpha} =
abla_{ heta_k} L_{\mathsf{meta}}(heta_k) \cdot \left(-\sum_{j=0}^{k-1}
abla_{ heta_j} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(heta_j)
ight)$$

$$\alpha \leftarrow \max(0, \alpha - \eta g_{\alpha}), \quad \theta \leftarrow \theta - \alpha \odot \nabla_{\theta} L_{\text{meta}}(\theta_{k}).$$

to mitigate gradient interference

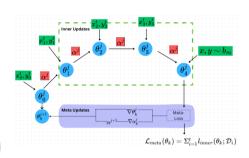


Figure: LookAhead MAML Approach

Deriving the Hypergradient g_{α} (Part 1)

We derive the meta-gradient w.r.t. per-parameter step-size α :

$$\begin{split} g_{\alpha} &= \frac{\partial}{\partial \alpha} L_{\mathsf{meta}}(\theta_{k}) = \frac{\partial L_{\mathsf{meta}}(\theta_{k})}{\partial \theta_{k}} \cdot \frac{\partial \theta_{k}}{\partial \alpha} \\ &= \nabla_{\theta} L_{\mathsf{meta}}(\theta_{k}) \cdot \frac{\partial}{\partial \alpha} \left(\theta_{k-1} - \alpha \circ \nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta_{k-1}) \right) \\ &= \nabla_{\theta} L_{\mathsf{meta}}(\theta_{k}) \cdot \left(\frac{\partial \theta_{k-1}}{\partial \alpha} - \frac{\partial}{\partial \alpha} \left(\alpha \circ \nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta_{k-1}) \right) \right) \end{split}$$

We now recursively expand $\frac{\partial \theta_{k-1}}{\partial \alpha}$ using the update rule:

$$\theta_j = \theta_{j-1} - \alpha \circ \nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta_{j-1})$$

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Deriving the Hypergradient g_{α} (Part 2)

Unrolling the recursion:

$$\begin{split} \frac{\partial \theta_k}{\partial \alpha} &= -\nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta_{k-1}) + \left(\frac{\partial \theta_{k-1}}{\partial \alpha} \cdot \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta_{k-1}} \left(-\alpha \circ \nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta_{k-1}) \right) \right) \\ &\approx -\sum_{j=0}^{k-1} \nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathsf{inner}}(\theta_j) \quad \mathsf{(First-order approximation: ignore higher-order α-dependence)} \end{split}$$

So the hypergradient becomes:

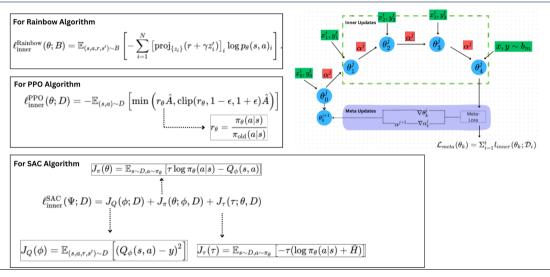
$$g_lpha =
abla_ heta \mathsf{L}_\mathsf{meta}(heta_k) \cdot \left(-\sum_{j=0}^{k-1}
abla_ heta \ell_\mathsf{inner}(heta_j)
ight)$$

Update Rule:

$$\alpha \leftarrow \max(0, \alpha - \eta g_{\alpha})$$
 (projected gradient descent)

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LookAhead MAML for Rainbow DQN, PPO and SAC



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Proposed Modifications for Look-Ahead MAML in RL Setup

► Experience Replay inside Inner Loop

We now do K gradient steps using fresh mini-batches from the replay buffer:

$$\theta_i = \theta_{i-1} - \alpha \circ \nabla_{\theta}[\ell_{\text{inner}}(\theta_{i-1}; \mathcal{B}_i)], \quad \mathcal{B}_i \sim \mathcal{D}, \ j = 1, \dots, K.$$

► Correcting for Off-Policy Bias

When we compute the inner-loop loss on replayed transitions $(s, a, r, s') \sim \mathcal{D}$, we weight by the importance ratio:

$$\ell_{ ext{inner}}(heta) = -\mathop{\mathbb{E}}_{\substack{s \sim \mathcal{D} \ a \sim \pi_{ heta_{ ext{old}}}}}\left[\, w(s, a) \, \log \pi_{ heta}(a \mid s) \, Q_{\phi}(s, a)
ight], \quad w(s, a) = rac{\pi_{ heta}(a \mid s)}{\pi_{ heta_{ ext{old}}}(a \mid s)}.$$

► Variance Control in Policy Updates

To stabilize the meta-gradient, we add a clipping or trust-region term to each inner step:

$$\begin{aligned} \theta_j &= \theta_{j-1} - \ \alpha \circ \mathrm{clip} \big(\nabla_{\theta} \ell_{\mathrm{inner}} (\theta_{j-1}), \ -\delta, \ +\delta \big), \text{or equivalently constrain the KL:} \\ & \min_{\theta_j} \ \ell_{\mathrm{inner}} (\theta_j) \quad \text{s.t.} \quad \mathrm{KL} \big[\pi_{\theta_j} \ \big\| \ \pi_{\theta_{j-1}} \big] \leq \epsilon. \end{aligned}$$

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Proposed Modifications for Look-Ahead MAML in RL Setup

Control Prior Definition

A fixed, well-tuned policy $\pi_{\text{prior}}(a \mid s)$ (e.g. LQR, H- ∞ , PID) used to stabilize learning. For $\lambda \in [0,1]$

► Mixture Policy

$$\pi_{ ext{mix}}(a \mid s) = (1 - \lambda) \pi_{\theta}(a \mid s) + \lambda \pi_{ ext{prior}}(a \mid s),$$

Gradient Estimate

$$abla_{ heta} J_{ ext{mix}} = \mathbb{E}_{s, a \sim \pi_{ ext{mix}}} [
abla_{ heta} \log \pi_{ ext{mix}}(a \mid s) \ Q(s, a)].$$

► Variance Reduction

$$[\nabla_{\theta} J_{\text{mix}}] \leq (1 - \lambda)^2 [\nabla_{\theta} J],$$

with bias $O(\lambda)$.

- 1. Choose a stabilizing prior π_{prior} .
- 2. Set mixing coef. λ (e.g. 0.1).
- 3. Collect rollouts under π_{mix} .
- 4. Compute updates via $\nabla_{\theta} \log \pi_{\min}(a \mid s)$.
- 5. Optionally anneal λ over time.

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Conclusions

Look-Ahead MAML tackles gradient misalignment, using per-parameter learning rates and meta-objective with implementation trick that includes replay memory through Reservoir Sampling and populating a Replay Buffer (\mathcal{R})

Overall, we provide a mathematical derivation of the objective functions for PPO, SAC, and the Rainbow algorithm in LookAhead MAML framework. We also provide modifications for the existing LookAhead MAML framework to RL Setup.



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Future Work and Empirical Experiments

Atari benchmark:(diverse set of games) widely used tested in RL.

57 games with different transition function and reward functions

We plan to test and empirically demonstrate our proposed method (La-MAML with PPO, SAC, and Rainbow DQN) on a sequence of games(tasks) from this benchmark.

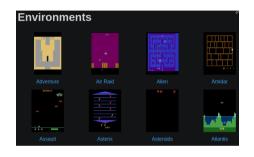


Figure: Arcade Learning Environment (ALE)

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 $^{^9\}mathrm{Marc}$ G. Bellemare et.al 2012, The Arcade Learning Environment: An Evaluation Platform for General Agents

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Dr. Srijith P.K (Associate Professor), Department of Computer Science and Department of Al, IIT Hyderabad



Bayesian Reasoning And INtelligence Lab





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Questions?

"The only stupid question is the one you were afraid to ask but never did"
- Richard Sutton

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