REINFORCEMENT LEARNING WITH BAYESIAN CLASSIFIERS: EFFICIENT SKILL LEARNING FROM OUTCOME EXAMPLES

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ABSTRACT

Exploration in reinforcement learning is, in general, a challenging problem. In this work, we study a more tractable class of reinforcement learning problems defined by data that provides examples of successful outcome states. In this case, the reward function can be obtained automatically by training a classifier to classify states as successful or not. We argue that, with appropriate representation and regularization, such a classifier can guide a reinforcement learning algorithm to an effective solution. However, as we will show, this requires the classifier to make uncertainty-aware predictions that are very difficult with standard deep networks. To address this, we propose a novel mechanism for obtaining calibrated uncertainty based on an amortized technique for computing the normalized maximum likelihood distribution. We show that the resulting algorithm has a number of intriguing connections to both count-based exploration methods and prior algorithms for learning reward functions from data, while being able to guide algorithms towards the specified goal more effectively. We show how using amortized normalized maximum likelihood for reward inference is able to provide effective reward guidance for solving a number of challenging navigation and robotic manipulation tasks which prove difficult for other algorithms.

1 INTRODUCTION

While reinforcement learning (RL) has been shown to successfully solve problems with careful reward design (Rajeswaran et al., 2018; OpenAI et al., 2019), RL in its most general form, with no assumptions on the dynamics or reward function, requires solving a challenging uninformed search problem in which rewards are sparsely observed. Techniques which explicitly provide "reward-shaping" (Ng et al., 1999), or modify the reward function to guide learning, can help take some of the burden off of exploration, but shaped rewards can be difficult to obtain without domain knowledge.

In this paper, we aim to reformulate the reinforcement learning problem to make it easier for the user to specify the task and to provide a tractable reinforcement learning objective. Instead of requiring a reward function designed for an objective, our method instead assumes a user-provided set of *successful outcome examples*: states in which the desired task has been accomplished successfully. The algorithm aims to estimate the distribution over these states and maximize the probability of reaching states that are likely under the distribution. Prior work on learning from success examples (Fu et al., 2018b; Zhu et al., 2020) focused primarily on alleviating the need for manual reward design. In our work, we focus on the potential for this mode of task specification to produce more tractable RL problems and solve more challenging classes of tasks. Intuitively, when provided with explicit examples of successful states, the RL algorithm should be able to direct its exploration, rather than simply hope to randomly chance upon potentially high reward states.

The main challenge in instantiating this idea into a practical algorithm is performing appropriate uncertainty quantification in estimating whether a given state corresponds to a successful outcome. Our approach trains a classifier to distinguish successful states, provided by the user, from those generated by the current policy, analogously to generative adversarial networks (Goodfellow et al., 2014) and previously proposed methods for inverse reinforcement learning (Fu et al., 2018a). In general, such a classifier is not guaranteed to provide a good optimization landscape for learning

the policy. We discuss how a particular form of uncertainty quantification based on the normalized maximum likelihood (NML) distribution produces better reward guidance for learning. We also connect our approach to count-based exploration methods, showing that a classifier with suitable uncertainty estimates reduces to a count-based exploration method in the absence of any generalization across states, while also discussing how it improves over count-based exploration in the presence of good generalization. We then propose a practical algorithm to train success classifiers in a computationally efficient way with NML, and show how this form of reward inference allows us to solve difficult problems more efficiently, providing experimental results which outperform existing algorithms on a number of navigation and robotic manipulation domains.

2 Related Work

A number of techniques have been proposed to improve exploration.These techniques either add reward bonuses that encourage a policy to visit novel states in a task-agnostic manner (Wiering and Schmidhuber, 1998; Auer et al., 2002; Schaul et al., 2011; Houthooft et al., 2016; Pathak et al., 2017; Tang et al., 2017; Stadie et al., 2015; Bellemare et al., 2016; Burda et al., 2018a; O'Donoghue, 2018) or perform Thompson sampling or approximate Thompson sampling based on a prior over value functions (Strens, 2000; Osband et al., 2013; 2016). While these techniques are uninformed about the actual task, we consider a constrained set of problems where examples of successes can allow for more task directed exploration. In real world problems, designing well-shaped reward functions makes exploration easier but often requires significant domain knowledge (Andrychowicz et al., 2020), access to privileged information about the environment (Levine et al., 2016) and/or a human in the loop providing rewards (Knox and Stone, 2009; Singh et al., 2019b). Prior work has considered specifying rewards by providing example demonstrations, and inferring rewards with inverse RL (Abbeel and Ng, 2004; Ziebart et al., 2008; Ho and Ermon, 2016; Fu et al., 2018a). This requires expensive expert demonstrations to be provided to the agent. In contrast, our work has the minimal requirement of simply providing successful outcome states, which can be done cheaply. This subclass of problems is also related to goal conditioned RL (Kaelbling, 1993; Schaul et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2017; Andrychowicz et al., 2017; Nair et al., 2018; Veeriah et al., 2018; Rauber et al., 2018; Warde-Farley et al., 2018; Colas et al., 2019; Ghosh et al., 2019; Pong et al., 2020) but is more general, since it allows for a more abstract notion of task success.

A core idea behind our work is using a Bayesian classifier to learn a suitable reward function. Bayesian inference with expressive models and high dimensional data can often be intractable, requiring assumptions on the form of the posterior (Hoffman et al., 2013; Blundell et al., 2015; Maddox et al., 2019). In this work, we build on the concept of normalized maximum likelihood (Rissanen, 1996; Shtar'kov, 1987), or NML, to learn Bayesian classifiers. Although NML is typically considered from the perspective of optimal coding (Grünwald, 2007; Fogel and Feder, 2018), we show how it can be used to learn success classifiers, and discuss its connections to exploration and reward shaping.

3 Preliminaries

In this paper, we study a modified reinforcement learning problem, where instead of the standard reward function, the agent is provided with *successful outcome examples*. This reformulation not only provides a modality for task specification that may be more natural for users to provide in some settings (Fu et al., 2018b; Zhu et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2019a) but, as we will show, can also make learning easier. We also derive a meta-learned variant of the conditional normalized maximum likelihood (CNML) distribution for representing our reward function, in order to make evaluation tractable. We discuss background on successful outcome examples and CNML in this section.

3.1 Reinforcement Learning with Examples of Successful Outcomes

Formally, we follow the framework proposed by Fu et al. (2018b) and assume that we are provided with a Markov decision process (MDP) *without* a reward function, given by $\mathcal{M}$, where $\mathcal{M} = (\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{T}, \gamma, \mu_0)$, as well as successful outcome examples $\mathcal{S}_+ = \{s_+^k\}_{k=1}^K$, which is a set of states in which the desired task has been accomplished. This formalism is easiest to describe in terms of the control as inference framework (Levine, 2018). The relevant graphical model in Figure 7 consists of states and actions, as well as binary *success* variables e_t which represent the occurrence of a particular

event. The agent's goal is to cause this event to occur (e.g., a robot that is cleaning the floor must cause the "floor is clean" event to occur). Formally, we assume that the states in $\mathcal{S}_+$ are sampled from the distribution $p(s_t|e_t = \text{True})$ – that is, states where the desired event has taken place. In this work, we focus on efficient methods for solving this reformulation of the RL problem, by utilizing a novel uncertainty quantification method to represent the distribution $p(e_t|s_t)$.

In practice, prior methods that build on this and similar reformulations of the RL problem (Fu et al., 2018b) derive an algorithm where the reward function in RL is produced by a classifier that estimates $p(e_t = \text{True}|s_t)$. Following the adversarial inverse reinforcement learning (AIRL) derivation (Fu et al., 2018a; Finn et al., 2016), it is possible to show that the correct source of *negative* examples for training this classifier is the state distribution of the policy itself, $\pi(s)$. This insight results in a simple algorithm: at each iteration of the algorithm, the policy is updated to maximize the current reward, given by $\log p(e_t = \text{True}|s_t)$, then samples from the policy are added to the set of negative examples $\mathcal{S}_-$, and the classifier is retrained on the original positive set $\mathcal{S}_+$ and the updated negative set $\mathcal{S}_-$.

3.2 Conditional Normalized Maximum Likelihood

Our method builds on the principle of conditional normalized maximum likelihood (NML) (Rissanen and Roos, 2007; Grünwald, 2007; Fogel and Feder, 2018), which we review briefly. CNML is a method for performing k-way classification, given a model class Θ and a dataset $\mathcal{D} = \{(x_0, y_0), (x_1, y_1), ..., (x_n, y_n)\}$, and has been shown to provide better calibrated predictions and uncertainty estimates with minimax regret guarantees (Bibas et al., 2019). To predict the class of a query point x_q, CNML constructs k augmented datasets by adding x_q with a different label in each datasets, which we write as $\mathcal{D} \cup (x_q, y = i), i \in (1, 2, ..., k)$. CNML then defines the class distribution by solving the maximum likelihood estimation problem at query time for each of these augmented datasets to convergence, and normalize the likelihoods as follows:

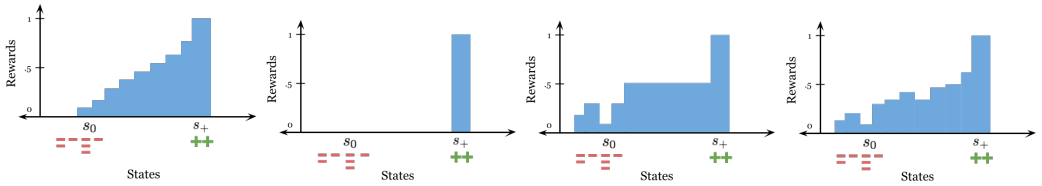
$$p_{\text{CNML}}(y = i|x_q) = \frac{p_{\theta_i}(y = i|x_q)}{\sum_{j=1}^{k} p_{\theta_j}(y = j|x_q)}, \qquad \theta_i = \arg\max_{\theta \in \Theta} \mathbb{E}_{(x,y)\sim\mathcal{D}\cup(x_q,y=i)}[\log p_\theta(y|x)] \quad (1)$$

Intuitively, if x_q is close to other datapoints in $\mathcal{D}$, then the model will struggle to assign a high likelihood to labels that differ substantially from other nearby points. However, if x_q is far from all datapoints in $\mathcal{D}$, then the different augmented MLE problems can easily classify x_q as an arbitrary class, providing us with a likelihood closer to uniform. More formally, CNML is an application of the NML principle for obtaining minimum description length models, and we refer readers to Grünwald (2007) for an in-depth discussion. A major limitation of CNML is that it requires training an entire neural network to convergence on the entire augmented dataset every time we want to evaluate a test point's class probabilities. We will address this issue in Section 5.

4 Bayesian Success Classifiers for Reward Inference

Ideally, training a classifier with the policy samples as negative examples as described in Section 3.1 should yield a smooth decision boundary between the well-separated negative and positive examples.For example, Figure 1 depicts a simple 1-D example, where the agent starts at the left (s_0) and the positive outcomes are at the right (s_+) side of the environment. Since the positives are on the right and the negatives are on the left, one might expect a classifier to gradually increase its prediction of a success as we move to the right (Figure 1a), which would provide a dense reward signal for the policy to move to the right. However, this idealized scenario rarely happens in practice. Without suitable regularization, the decision boundary between the positive and negative examples may not be smooth. In fact, the decision boundary of an optimal classifier may take on the form of a sharp boundary *anywhere* between the positive and negative examples in the early stages of training (Figure 1b). As a result, the classifier might provide little to no reward signal for the policy, since it can assign arbitrarily small probabilities to the states sampled from the policy. We note that this issue is not pathological: our experiments in Section 6 show that this poor reward signal issue happens in practice and can greatly hinder learning. In this section, we will discuss how an appropriate classifier training method can avoid these uninformative rewards.

4.1 Regularized Success Classifiers via Normalized Maximum Likelihood



(a) Ideal rewards (b) MLE (c) Tabular CNML (d) CNML + generalization

Figure 1: An idealized illustration of a well-shaped reward and the solutions that various classifier training schemes might provide. Red bars represent visited states near the initial state s_0 and green pluses represent the example success examples s_+. (a) The ideal reward would provide learning signal to encourage the policy to move from the start states s_0 to the successful states s_+. (b) When training a success classifier with MLE, the classifier may output zero (or arbitrary) probabilities when evaluated at new states. (c) Tabular CNML will give a prior probability of 0.5 on new states. (d) When using function approximation, CNML with generalization will provide a degree of shaping towards the goal.

To create effective shaping, we need to impose a prior on our classifier so that it provides a more informative reward when evaluated at rarely visited states that lie on the path to successful outcomes. A more informative reward function is one that assigns higher rewards to the *fringe* of the states visited by the policy, because this reward function will encourage the policy to explore and move towards the desired states. We can construct such a reward function by imposing the prior that novel states have a non-negligible chance of being a success state. To do so, we train a Bayesian classifier using conditional normalized maximum likelihood (CNML) (Shtar'kov, 1987), as we described in Section 3, which is essentially imposing a uniform prior on the space of outcomes.

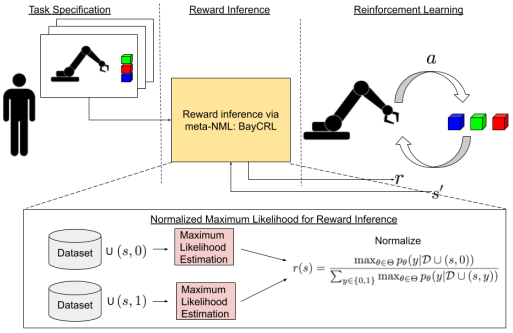


Figure 2: BayCRL: Illustration of how Bayesian classifiers learned with normalized maximum likelihood can be used to provide informative learning signal during learning. The human user provides examples of successful outcomes, which are then used in combination with on policy samples to iterate between training a classifier with NML and training RL with this reward.

To use CNML for reward inference, the procedure is similar to the one described in Section 3. We construct a dataset using the provided successful outcomes as positives and the on-policy samples as negatives. However, the label probabilities for RL are then produced by the CNML procedure described in Equation 1 to obtain the rewards $r(s) = p_{\text{CNML}}(e = 1|s)$. How does this affect reward assignment during learning? To illustrate the impact of using CNML, we can visualize a potential assignment of rewards with a CNML-based classifier on the problem described earlier. When the success classifier is trained with CNML instead of standard maximum likelihood, intermediate unseen states would receive non-zero rewards rather than simply having vanishing likelihoods like in Figure 1b. The didactic illustration in Fig 1c and Fig 1d shows how the rewards obtained via NML might incentivize exploration. When there is no generalization across states, the CNML likelihood will correspond directly to count based exploration (as we show below). However, when there is actually some degree of generalization across states, the classifier can provide more directed shaping towards the goal.

4.2 Relationship to Count-Based Exploration

In this section we formally relate the success likelihoods obtained via CNML to commonly used exploration methods based on counts. Formally, we prove that the success classifier trained with CNML is equivalent to a version of count-based exploration in the absence of any generalization across states (i.e., a fully tabular setting).

Theorem 4.1. *Suppose we are estimating success probabilities $p(e = 1|s)$ in the tabular setting, where we have a separate parameter independently for each state. Let $N(s)$ denote the number of times state s has been visited by the policy, and let $G(s)$ be the number of occurrences of state s in the successful outcomes. Then the CNML probability $p_{\text{CNML}}(e = 1|s)$ is equal to $\frac{G(s)+1}{N(s)+G(s)+2}$. For states that are never observed to be successful, we then recover inverse counts $\frac{1}{N(s)+2}$.*

Refer to Appendix Appendix A.5 for a full proof. Additionally, in practice, the learned classifier attains non-negligible generalization. As long as this generalization is correlated with the dynamics of the environment, we expect this generalization to improve shaping, as we discuss next.

4.3 Reward Shaping with Bayesian Success Classifiers

While the analysis above suggests that a CNML classifier would give us something akin to an exploration bonus, the structure of the problem and the state space actually provides us more information to guide us towards the goal. In most environments (Brockman et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2019) the state space does not consist of independent and uncorrelated categorical variables, but is provided in a representation that relates at least roughly to the dynamics structure in the environment. For instance, states close to the goal dynamically are also typically close to the goal in the metric space defined by the states. Indeed, this observation is the basis of many commonly used heuristic reward shaping methods, such as rewards given by Euclidean distance to target states.

In this case, the task specification can actually provide more information than simply performing uninformed count-based exploration. Since the uncertainty aware classifier described in Section 4.1 is built on top of features that are correlated with environment dynamics, it is able to incentivize *task-aware* directed exploration. A depiction of this phenomenon is illustrated in Fig 1d. As compared to CNML without generalization in Fig 1c, we expect the intermediate rewards to provide more shaping towards the goal. This is evident from our empirical results in Section 6 where BayCRL is able to significantly outperform methods for task agnostic exploration.

5 BayCRL: Training Bayesian Success Classifiers for Outcome Driven RL via Meta-Learning and CNML

In Section 4, we discussed how Bayesian success classifiers can incentivize exploration and provide reward shaping to guide RL. However, the reward inference technique via CNML described in Section 4.1 is computationally intractable, as it requires optimizing maximum likelihood estimation problems to convergence on every data point we want to query. In this section, we describe a novel approximation that allows us to instantiate this method in practice.

5.1 Meta-Learning for CNML

We adopt ideas from meta-learning to amortize the cost of obtaining the CNML distribution. As noted in Section 4.1, the computation of the CNML distribution involves repeatedly solving maximum likelihood problems that share a significant amount of common structure. We should use this commonality between problems to quickly obtain CNML estimates without redoing the slow training process repeatedly. One set of techniques that are directly applicable is meta-learning for few shot classification. Meta-learning uses a distribution of training problems to explicitly learn models that can quickly adapt to new problems.

To apply meta-learning to the CNML problem, we can formulate each of the maximum likelihood problems described in Equation 1 as a separate task for meta-learning, and apply any standard meta-learning technique to obtain a model capable of few-shot adaptation to the MLE problems required for CNML. While any meta-learning algorithm is applicable, we found model agnostic meta-learning (MAML) to be an effective choice of algorithm. In short, MAML tries to learn a model that can quickly adapt to new tasks via a few steps of gradient descent. We refer readers to Finn et al. (2017) for a detailed overview.

This procedure is illustrated in Fig 8, and can be described as follows: given a dataset $\mathcal{D} = \{(x_0, y_0), (x_1, y_1), ..., (x_n, y_n)\}$, $2n$ different tasks τ_i can be constructed, each corresponding to performing maximum likelihood estimation on the dataset with a certain proposed label for x_i: $\max_\theta \mathbb{E}_{(x,y)\sim\mathcal{D}\cup(x_i,y=0)} \log p(y|x,\theta)$ or $\max_\theta \mathbb{E}_{(x,y)\sim\mathcal{D}\cup(x_i,y=1)} \log p(y|x,\theta)$. Given these constructed tasks $\mathcal{S}(\tau)$, meta-training can be performed by performing the bi-level optimization described in Finn et al. (2017):

$$\max_\theta \ \mathbb{E}_{\tau\sim\mathcal{S}(\tau)}[\mathcal{L}(\tau,\theta')], \quad s.t \ \ \theta' = \theta - \alpha\nabla_\theta\mathcal{L}(\tau,\theta). \tag{2}$$

This training procedure gives us parameters θ that can then be quickly adapted to provide the CNML distribution simply by performing a step of gradient descent. The model can be queried for the CNML distribution by starting from θ and taking one step of gradient descent for the query point augmented dataset, each with a different potential label. These likelihoods are then normalized to provide the CNML distribution as follows:

$$p_{\text{meta-NML}}(y|x;\mathcal{D}) = \frac{p_{\theta_y}(y|x)}{\sum_{y\in\mathcal{Y}} p_{\theta_y}(y|x)}, \qquad \theta_y = \theta - \alpha\nabla_\theta \mathbb{E}_{(x_i,y_i)\sim\mathcal{D}\cup(x,y)}[\mathcal{L}(x_i,y_i,\theta)].$$

This algorithm, which we call *meta-NML*, allows us to obtain normalized likelihood estimates without having to retrain maximum likelihood to convergence at every single query point, since the model can now solve maximum likelihood problems of this form very quickly. A complete detailed description and pseudocode of this algorithm are provided in Appendix A.2.

5.2 Applying Meta-NML to Success Classification

We apply the meta-NML algorithm described above to learning Bayesian success classifiers for providing rewards for reinforcement learning, in our proposed algorithm, which we term BayCRL— Bayesian classifiers for reinforcement learning. Similarly to Fu et al. (2018b), we can train our Bayesian classifier by first constructing a dataset $\mathcal{D}$ for binary classification. This is done by using the provided examples of successful outcomes as positives, and on-policy examples collected by the policy as negatives. Given this dataset, the Bayesian classifier parameters $\theta_{\text{meta-NML}}$ can be trained via meta-NML as described in Equation 2. The classifier can then be used to directly and quickly assign rewards to a state s according to its probabilities $r(s) = p_{\text{meta-NML}}(e=1|s)$ (via a step of gradient descent, as described in Equation 3), and perform standard reinforcement learning.

Algorithm 1 BayCRL: Bayesian Classifiers for RL

User provides success examples $\mathcal{S}_+$
Initialize dataset $\mathcal{D}$ with $\mathcal{S}_+$ as positives with label 1.
Initialize policy π randomly.
for iteration $i = 1, 2, ...$ **do**
  Collect on-policy examples $\mathcal{S}_-$ by executing π in the environment.
  Add on-policy examples $\mathcal{S}_-$ to $\mathcal{D}$ as negatives with label 0.
  if iteration $i \mod k$ == 0 **then**
    Meta-train via meta-NML on tasks sampled from $\mathcal{D}$ using Equation 2
  Assign state rewards via Equation 5
  Train π with RL algorithm

$$p_{\text{meta-NML}}(e=1|s) = \frac{p_{\theta_1}(e=1|s)}{\sum_{i\in\{0,1\}} p_{\theta_i}(e=i|s)} \tag{3}$$

$$\theta_0 = \theta_{\text{meta-NML}} - \alpha\nabla_\theta \mathbb{E}_{(s_j,e_j)\sim\mathcal{D}\cup(s,e=0)}[\mathcal{L}(e_j,s_j,\theta)] \tag{4}$$

$$\theta_1 = \theta_{\text{meta-NML}} - \alpha\nabla_\theta \mathbb{E}_{(s_j,e_j)\sim\mathcal{D}\cup(s,e=1)}[\mathcal{L}(e_j,s_j,\theta)] \tag{5}$$

An overview of this algorithm is provided in Algorithm 1, and full details are in Appendix A.2.

6 Experimental Evaluation

In our experimental evaluation we aim to answer the following questions: (1) Do the learning dynamics of prior classifier-based reward learning methods provide informative rewards for RL? (2) Does using BayCRL help address the exploration challenge when solving RL problems specified by successful outcomes? (3) Does using BayCRL help provide better reward shaping than simply performing naïvely uninformed exploration? To evaluate these questions, we evaluate our proposed algorithm BayCRL with the following setup. Further details and videos can be found at `https://sites.google.com/view/baycrl/home`

6.1 Experimental Setup

We start off by understanding the algorithm behavior by evaluating it on maze navigation problems, which require avoiding several local optima before truly reaching the goal. Then, to evaluate our method in more complex domains, we consider three robotic manipulation tasks that were considered

in Fu et al. (2018b) with a Sawyer robot arm: door opening, tabletop object pushing, and 3D object picking. As we show in our results, exploration in these environments is challenging and using naively chosen reward shaping often does not solve the problem at hand.

We compare with a number of prior algorithms and ablations. To provide a comparison with a standard previous method based on success classifiers trained with an IRL-based adversarial method, we include the VICE algorithm Fu et al. (2018b). We also include a comparison with a recently proposed technique for learning dynamical distances Hartikainen et al. (2019). We additionally include comparisons to algorithms for uninformed exploration to show that BayCRL does a more directed form of exploration and reward shaping. To provide an apples-to-apples comparison, we use the same VICE method for training classifiers, but combine it with novelty-based exploration based on random network distillation (Burda et al., 2018b).

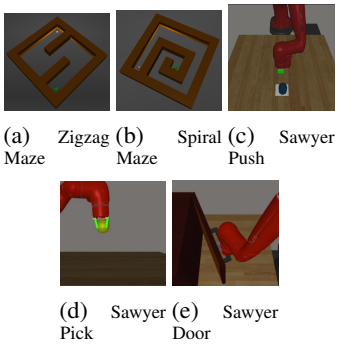


Figure 3: We evaluate on two maze environments and three robotics tasks: (a) the agent must navigate around an S-shaped corridor (b) the agent must navigate a spiral corridor, (c) the robot must push a puck to location, (d) the robot picks up a tennis ball from a table to a given location, (e) the robot opens the door to a specified angle.

6.2 Comparisons with Prior Algorithms

We compare with prior algorithms on the domains described above. As we can see in Fig 4, BayCRL is able to very quickly learn how to solve these challenging exploration tasks, often reaching significantly better asymptotic performance than most prior methods, and doing so significantly more efficiently than VICE (Fu et al., 2018b) or DDL (Hartikainen et al., 2019). This suggests that BayCRL is able to provide directed reward shaping and exploration that is substantially better than standard classifier-based methods (e.g., VICE).

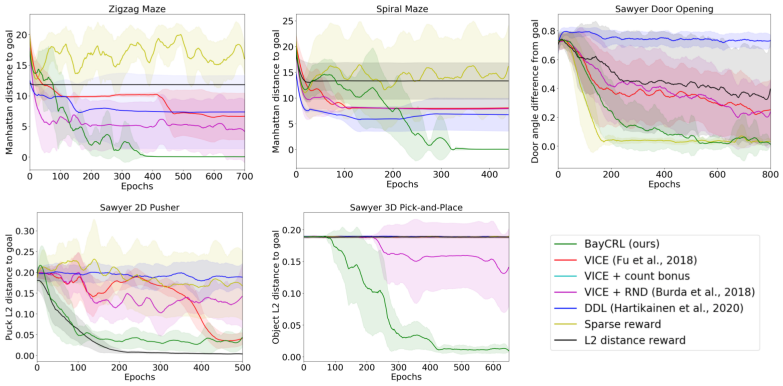


Figure 4: BayCRL performs substantially better on our evaluation environments when compared to prior algorithms (lower is better). BayCRL also performs better or comparably to a heuristically shaped hand-designed reward that uses Euclidean distance, demonstrating that designing a well-shaped reward is not trivial in these domains. Shading indicates a standard deviation across 5 seeds.

To isolate whether the benefits purely come from exploration or also from task-aware reward shaping, we compare with methods that only perform uninformed, task-agnostic exploration. On the maze environments, where we can discretize the state space, we compute ground truth count-based bonuses for exploration. For the higher dimensional robotics tasks, we use RND (Burda et al., 2018b). From these comparisons, shown in Fig 4, it is clear that BayCRL significantly outperforms methods that use novelty-seeking exploration, but do not otherwise provide effective reward shaping. In combination with our visualizations in Section 6.4, this suggests that BayCRL is providing useful task-aware reward shaping more effectively than uniformed exploration methods. We also compare BayCRL to a manually heuristically-designed shaped reward function, based on Euclidean distance. As shown in Fig 4, BayCRL generally outperforms simple manual shaping in terms of sample complexity and asymptotic performance, indicating that the learned shaping is non-trivial and adapted to the task.

6.3 ABLATIONS

We first evaluate the importance of meta-learning for estimating the NML distribution. In Figure 5, we see that naïvely estimating the NML distribution with a small number of gradient steps, without meta-training, results in much worse performance. Second, we analyze the importance of making the BayCRL classifier aware of the task being solved, to understand whether BayCRL is informed by the success examples, or simply approximates count-based exploration. To that end, we modify the training procedure so that the dataset $\mathcal{D}$ consists of only the on-policy negatives, and add the inferred reward from the Bayesian classifier to the reward obtained by a standard MLE classifier (similarly to the VICE+RND baseline). We see that this performs poorly, showing that the BayCRL classifier is doing more than just performing count-based exploration.

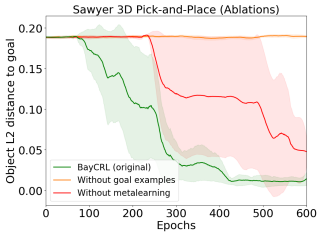
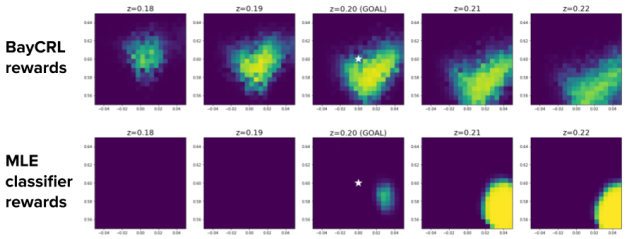


Figure 5: Ablative analysis of BayCRL. The amortization from meta-learning and access to goal examples are important components for performance.

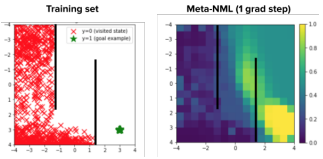
6.4 ANALYSIS OF BAYCRL

To further analyze BayCRL, we first visualize the shaped rewards on the Sawyer Pick task. In Fig 6a we see that the BayCRL rewards clearly correlate with the distance to the object's goal position, whereas the MLE classifier has a sharp, poorly-shaped decision boundary.

Next, to understand the connection between BayCRL and count based exploration, we visualize the reward landscape in an early iteration of the Zigzag Maze task with BayCRL in Fig 6b. We see that the algorithm maintains a fringe of least visited states and rewards those states more, explicitly encouraging exploration. Furthermore, meta-NML is able to reasonably approximate the idealized NML rewards with just one gradient step, while also benefiting from additional shaping due to generalization of the classifier. See Appendix A.3 for a more detailed visualization.



(a) Visualization of reward shaping for Picking at various z values. BayCRL learns rewards that provide a smooth slope toward the goal, adapting to the policy and guiding it to learn the task, while the MLE classifier learns a sharp and poorly shaped decision boundary.



(b) Samples (left) and meta-NML rewards (right) on the Maze task. meta-NML approximates a count bonus with just one gradient step, while also providing additional task-directed reward shaping toward the goal (bottom right).

Figure 6: Analysis of the learned reward function in terms of reward shaping and exploration.

7 DISCUSSION

In this work, we consider a subclass of reinforcement learning problems where a task is specified by examples of successful outcomes. We analyze how solutions via standard success classifiers suffer from shortcomings, and training Bayesian classifiers allows for better exploration to solve challenging problems. We discuss how the NML distribution can provide us a way to train such Bayesian classifiers, providing benefits of exploration and reward shaping. To make learning tractable, we propose a meta-learning approach to amortize the NML process.

While this work has shown the effectiveness of Bayesian classifiers for reward inference for tasks in simulation, it would be interesting to scale this solution to real world problems. Additionally, obtaining a theoretical understanding of how reward shaping interacts with learning dynamics would be illuminating in designing reward schemes.

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A APPENDIX

A.1 GRAPHICAL MODEL FOR CONTROL AS INFERENCE

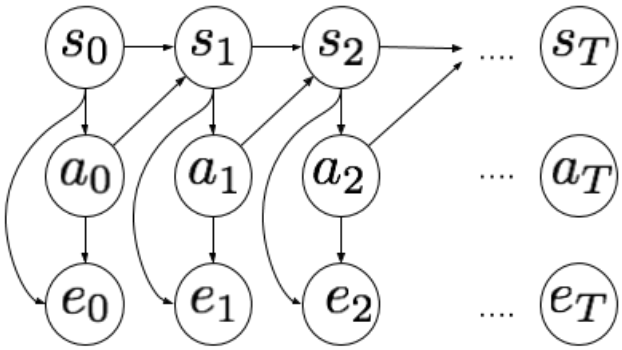

Figure 7: Graphical Model framework for Control as Inference. e_t correspond to auxiliary event variables representing successfully accomplishing the task

A.2 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF META-NML

We provide a detailed description of the meta-NML algorithm described in Section 5, and the details of the practical algorithm.

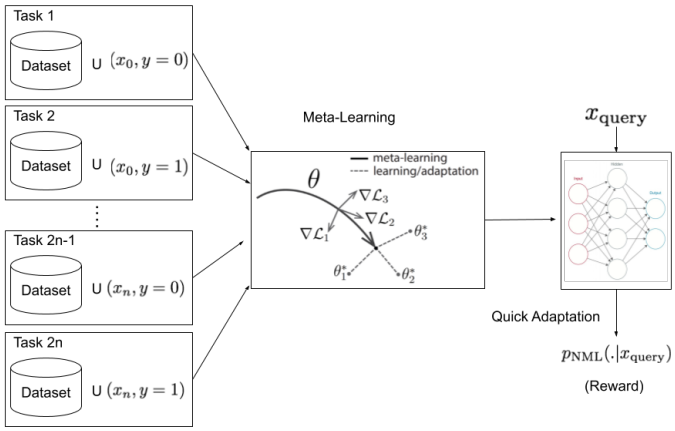

Figure 8: Figure illustrating the meta-training procedure for meta-NML.

Given a dataset $\mathcal{D} = \{(x_0, y_0), (x_1, y_1), .., (x_n, y_n)\}$, the meta-NML procedure proceeds by first constructing $k * n$ tasks from these data points, for a k shot classification problem. We will keep $k = 2$ for simplicity in this description, in accordance with the setup of binary success classifiers in RL. Each task τ_i is constructed by augmenting the dataset with a negative label $\mathcal{D} \cup (x_i, y = 0)$ or a positive label $\mathcal{D} \cup (x_i, y = 1)$. Now that each task consists of solving the maximum likelihood problem for it's augmented dataset, we can directly apply standard meta-learning algorithms to this setting. Building off the ideas in MAML (Finn et al., 2017), we can then train a set of model parameters θ such that after a single step of gradient descent it can quickly adapt to the optimal solution for the MLE problem on any of the augmented datasets. This is more formally written as

$$\max_{\theta} \ \mathbb{E}_{\tau \sim \mathcal{S}(\tau)}[\mathcal{L}(\tau, \theta')], \quad s.t \ \ \theta' = \theta - \alpha \nabla_{\theta} \mathcal{L}(\tau, \theta) \tag{6}$$

where $\mathcal{L}$ represents a standard classification loss function, α is the learning rate, and the distribution of tasks $p(\tau)$ is constructed as described above. For a new query point x, these initial parameters can then quickly be adapted to provide the CNML distribution by taking a gradient step on each augmented dataset to obtain the approximatley optimal MLE solution, and normalizing these as follows:

$$p_{\text{meta-NML}}(y|x; \mathcal{D}) = \frac{p_{\theta_y}(y|x)}{\sum_{y \in \mathcal{Y}} p_{\theta_y}(y|x)}, \qquad \theta_y = \theta - \alpha \nabla_{\theta} \mathbb{E}_{(x_i, y_i) \sim \mathcal{D} \cup (x, y)}[\mathcal{L}(x_i, y_i, \theta)]$$

This algorithm in principle can be optimized used any standard stochastic optimization method such as SGD, as described in Finn et al. (2017), backpropagating through the inner loop gradient update. For the specific problem setting that we consider, we have to employ some optimization tricks in order to enable learning:

A.2.1 Importance Weighting on Query Point

Since only one datapoint is augmented to the training set, it can get challenging for stochastic optimization to pay attention to this datapoint with increasing dataset sizes. In order to make sure the optimization considers the query point, we include the query point and proposed label (x_q, y) in every minibatch that is sampled, but downweight the loss computed on that point such that the overall objective remains unbiased. This is simply doing importance weighting, with the query point downweighted by a factor of $\frac{b}{N}$ where b is batchsize, N is the total number of points in the dataset.

A.2.2 Kernel Weighted Training Loss

The augmented dataset consists of points from the original dataset $\mathcal{D}$ and one augmented point (x_q, y). Given that we mostly care about having the proper likelihood on the query point, with an imperfect optimization process, the meta-training can yield solutions that are not very accurately representing true likelihoods on the query point. To counter this, we introduce a kernel weighting into the loss function in Equation 6 during meta-training and subsequently meta-testing. The kernel weighting modifies the training loss function as:

$$\max_{\theta} \ \mathbb{E}_{\tau \sim \mathcal{S}(\tau)}[\mathbb{E}_{(x,y) \sim \tau} \mathcal{K}(x, x_\tau) \mathcal{L}(x, y, \theta')], \quad s.t \ \ \theta' = \theta - \alpha \nabla_{\theta} \mathbb{E}_{(x,y) \sim \tau} \mathcal{K}(x, x_\tau) \mathcal{L}(x, y, \theta) \tag{7}$$

where x_τ is the query point for task τ and $\mathcal{K}$ is a choice of kernel. We typically choose exponential kernels centered around x_τ. Intuitively, this allows the meta-optimization to mainly consider the datapoints that are copies of the query point in the dataset, or are similar to the query point, and ensures that they have the correct likelihoods, instead of receiving interfering gradient signals from the many other points in the dataset. To make hyperparameter selection intuitive, we designate the strength of the exponential kernel by a parameter λ_{dist}, which is the Euclidean distance away from the query point at which the weight becomes 0.1. Formally, the weight of a point x in the loss function for query point x_τ is computed as:

$$K(x, x_\tau) = \exp\{-\frac{2.3}{\lambda_{dist}} ||x - x_\tau||_2\} \tag{8}$$

A.2.3 Extra Gradient Steps for Meta-Testing

Given that we are using MAML for meta-training, we can continue training at meta-test time using standard gradient descent. Taking a few more gradient steps on the meta-test time MLE objective allows the algorithm to be no worse than gradient descent in the worst case. When the meta-learner does not generalize as well, these extra gradient steps ensure that the estimated likelihoods are still well calibrated. While this gives us more accurate NML estimates, in practice we found that taking one gradient step was sufficient to achieve good performance on our RL tasks.

A.3 META-NML VISUALIZATION WITH ADDITIONAL GRADIENT STEPS

Below, we show a more detailed visualization of meta-NML outputs on data from the Zigzag Maze task. For comparison, we also include the rewards given by an ordinary classifier trained using MLE (which gives a poorly shaped reward due to the sharp decision boundary), and the idealized NML rewards (which come from a discrete count-based classifier).

Meta-NML is able to approximate the ideal NML rewards fairly well with just 1 gradient step, providing a much better shaped reward than the MLE classifier. By taking additional gradient steps, meta-NML can get arbitrarily close to the true NML outputs, which themselves correspond to inverse counts.

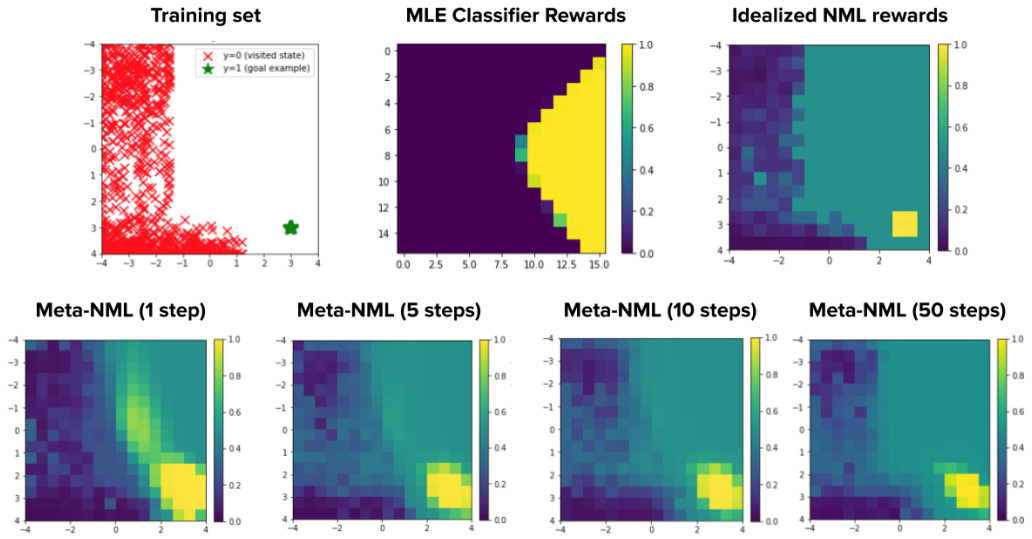

Figure 9: Comparison of MLE, discrete NML, and meta-NML rewards on data from the Zigzag Maze Task. Meta-NML approximates NML well with just one gradient step at test time, and converges to the true values with additional steps.

A.4 HYPERPARAMETER AND IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

We describe the hyperparmeter choices for our experiments here. We first list the general hyperparameters that were shared across runs, then provide tables of additional hyperparameters we tuned over for each domain and algorithm.

SAC	
Learning Rate	3×10^{-4}
Discount Factor γ	0.99
Policy Type	Gaussian
Policy Hidden Sizes	$(512, 512)$
Policy Hidden Activation	ReLU
RL Batch Size	1024
Reward Scaling	1
Replay Buffer Size	$500,000$
Q Hidden Sizes	$(512, 512)$
Q Hidden Activation	ReLU
Q Weight Decay	0
Q Learning Rate	3×10^{-4}
Target Network τ	5×10^{-3}
BayCRL	
Adaptation batch size	64
Meta-training tasks per epoch	128
Meta-test set size	2048
VICE	
Classifier Learning Rate	1×10^{-4}
Classifier Batch Size	128
Classifier Optimizer	Adam
RL Algorithm	SAC
RND	
Hidden Layer Sizes	$(256, 256)$
Output Units	512

Table 1: General hyperparameters used across all domains.

A.4.1 ZIGZAG MAZE HYPERPARAMETERS

BayCRL	
Classifier Hidden Layers	[(512, 512), **(2048, 2048)**]
λ_{dist}	[**0.5**, 1]
k_{query}	**1**
VICE	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{2}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
Weight Decay λ	$[0, \mathbf{5 \times 10^{-3}}]$
VICE+Count Bonus	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{2}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
Classifier reward scale	[**0.25**, 0.5, 1]
Weight Decay λ	$[\mathbf{0}, 5 \times 10^{-3}]$
DDL	
N_d	$[\mathbf{2}, 4]$
Training frequency (every n steps)	$[16, \mathbf{64}]$

Table 2: Hyperparameters we tuned for the Zigzag Maze task. Bolded values are what we use for the final runs in Section 6.

A.4.2 SPIRAL MAZE HYPERPARAMETERS

BayCRL	
Classifier Hidden Layers	[(512, 512), **(2048, 2048)**]
λ_{dist}	[**0.5**, 1]
k_{query}	**1**
VICE	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{2}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
Weight Decay λ	$[0, \mathbf{5 \times 10^{-3}}]$
VICE+Count Bonus	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{2}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
Classifier reward scale	[**0.25**, 0.5, 1]
Weight Decay λ	$[\mathbf{0}, 5 \times 10^{-3}]$
DDL	
N_d	$[\mathbf{2}, 4]$
Training frequency (every n steps)	$[16, \mathbf{64}]$

Table 3: Hyperparameters we tuned for the Spiral Maze task. Bolded values are what we use for the final runs in Section 6.

A.4.3 SAWYER PUSH HYPERPARAMETERS

BayCRL	
Classifier Hidden Layers	[(512, 512), **(2048, 2048)**]
λ_{dist}	$[0.2, \mathbf{0.6}, 1]$
k_{query}	**1**
VICE	
n_{VICE}	$[1, 2, \mathbf{10}]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
Weight Decay λ	$[\mathbf{0}, 5 \times 10^{-3}]$
VICE + RND	
n_{VICE}	$[1, 2, \mathbf{10}]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
RND reward scale	$[\mathbf{1}, 5, 10]$
DDL	
N_d	$[\mathbf{4}, 10]$
Training frequency (every n steps)	$[\mathbf{16}, 64]$

Table 4: Hyperparameters we tuned for the Sawyer Push task. Bolded values are what we use for the final runs in Section 6.

A.4.4 SAWYER PICK-AND-PLACE HYPERPARAMETERS

BayCRL	
Classifier Hidden Layers	[**(512, 512)**, (2048, 2048)]
λ_{dist}	$[0.2, \mathbf{0.6}, 1]$
k_{query}	**1**
VICE	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{2}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
Weight Decay λ	$[\mathbf{0}, 5 \times 10^{-3}]$
VICE + RND	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{2}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[0, \mathbf{1}]$
RND reward scale	$[\mathbf{1}, 5, 10]$
DDL	
N_d	$[4, \mathbf{10}]$
Training frequency (every n steps)	$[\mathbf{16}, 64]$

Table 5: Hyperparameters we tuned for the Sawyer Pick-and-Place task. Bolded values are what we use for the final runs in Section 6.

A.4.5 SAWYER DOOR OPENING HYPERPARAMETERS

BayCRL	
Classifier Hidden Layers	[(**512, 512**), (2048, 2048)]
λ_{dist}	$[0.05, 0.1, \mathbf{0.25}]$
k_{query}	[1, **2**]
VICE	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{5}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[\mathbf{0}, 1]$
Weight Decay λ	$[\mathbf{0}, 5 \times 10^{-3}]$
VICE + RND	
n_{VICE}	$[1, \mathbf{5}, 10]$
Mixup α	$[\mathbf{0}, 1]$
RND reward scale	$[1, \mathbf{5}, 10]$
DDL	
N_d	$[4, \mathbf{10}]$
Training frequency (every n steps)	$[\mathbf{16}, 64]$

Table 6: Hyperparameters we tuned for the Sawyer Door Opening task. Bolded values are what we use for the final runs in Section 6.

A.5 PROOF OF THEOREM 1 CONNECTING NML AND INVERSE COUNTS

We provide the proof of Theorem 1 here for completeness

Theorem A.1. *Suppose we are estimating success probabilities $p(e = 1|s)$ in the tabular setting, where we have a separate parameter independently for each state. Let $N(s)$ denote the number of times state s has been visited by the policy, and let $G(s)$ be the number of occurrences of state s in the successful outcomes. Then the CNML probability $p_{\text{CNML}}(e = 1|s)$ is equal to $\frac{G(s)+1}{N(s)+G(s)+2}$. For states that are never observed to be successful, we then recover inverse counts $\frac{1}{N(s)+2}$.*

Proof. In the fully tabular setting, our MLE estimates for $p(O|s)$ are simply given by finding the best parameter p_s for each state. The proof then proceeds by simple calculation.

For a state with $n = N(s)$ negative occurrences and $g = G(s)$ positive occurrences, the MLE estimate is simply given by $\frac{g}{n+g}$.

Now for evaluating CNML, we consider appending another instance for each class. The new parameter after appending a negative example is then $\frac{g}{n+g+1}$, which then assigns probability $\frac{n+1}{n+g+1}$ to the negative class. Similarly, after appending a positive example, the new parameter is $\frac{g+1}{n+g+1}$, so we try to assign probability $\frac{g+1}{n+g+1}$ to the positive class. Normalizing, we have

$$p_{\text{CNML}}(O = 1|s) = \frac{g+1}{n+g+2}. \tag{9}$$

When considering states that have only been visited on-policy, and are not included int the set of successful outcomes, then the likelihood reduces to

$$p_{\text{CNML}}(O = 1|s) = \frac{1}{n+2}. \tag{10}$$

□