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Roundoff Error in Metropolis-Hastings Accept-Reject Steps

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1. Introduction

The Metropolis-Hastings (M-H) accept-reject step (Metropolis et al., 1953; Hastings, 1970) is a central element of many Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) algorithms that are essential to modern Bayesian inference. If performed using exact arithmetic, it can be used to ensure that a Markov chain's stationary distribution is any distribution of interest $p(\theta)$, even if that distribution is only known up to a normalizing constant.

But computers cannot do exact arithmetic on real numbers, and in fact the trend in machine learning is towards lower-precision computation. Lower-precision formats enable both memory savings and more floating-point operations per second (FLOPS). Rather than use the traditional standard of 64-bit floating-point numbers (F64), modern ML software frameworks such as TensorFlow (Abadi et al., 2015), PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2019), and JAX (Bradbury et al., 2018) tend to default to 32-bit floating-point (F32) numerics, or even lower-precision formats such as TensorFloat-32 (TF32; Kharya, 2020) or bfloat16 (Wang and Kanwar, 2019) on supported hardware. These lower-precision formats seem to work fine for training large neural networks using stochastic gradient descent (e.g., Kalamkar et al., 2019). But are there consequences to using low-precision arithmetic in MCMC?

In this note, we consider what happens to the M-H algorithm when it is fed log-density calculations that are subject to roundoff error and catastrophic cancellations. Below, we will briefly review the nature of these errors and how they can arise in M-H algorithms. Next, we will develop a theoretical model of roundoff error in M-H corrections, and find that it can lead to exponentially low acceptance rates in the magnitude of the errors (if the errors have Gaussian tails) and bias (if different types of states produce different types of errors). Finally, we will discuss some consequences of this phenomenon, and touch on some practical ways to avoid these consequences of catastrophic cancellations in software.

2. A Source of Roundoff Error in Metropolis-Hastings

Metropolis-Hastings updates (M-H; Hastings, 1970) proceed by proposing a move from the current state θ to a new state θ' drawn from some proposal distribution $q(\theta' \mid \theta)$. If we are trying to sample from some distribution $p(\theta)$, then we replace the current state θ with the proposed state θ' with probability $\alpha = \min\{1, \frac{p(\theta')q(\theta|\theta')}{p(\theta)q(\theta'|\theta)}\}$, and otherwise keep the current state. (For both convenience and accuracy, M-H implementations typically compute the densities and their ratio in log space, e.g. $\exp\{\log p(\theta') - \log p(\theta)\}$ instead of $\frac{p(\theta')}{p(\theta)}$.) This procedure leaves the distribution $p(\theta)$ invariant; that is, if $\theta \sim p$ then $\theta' \sim p$ as well. So repeating it with a suitable q for long enough that it forgets its initial state will yield samples from p.

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The derivation of the M-H algorithm assumes that we use exact arithmetic to compute the acceptance probability α. Often, floating-point arithmetic is a good enough approximation to arithmetic on real numbers that we can ignore this issue. We have found F32 arithmetic to be problematic in at least two scenarios.

First, if the magnitude of $\log p(\theta') + \log q(\theta \mid \theta')$ is very large, then there may not be enough mantissa bits in an F32 scalar to accurately represent it. For example, the number 10000000.51 cannot be represented as an F32, and gets rounded to 10000001.0. This is a small *relative* error, but in the M-H accept-reject step *absolute* error is what matters. For example, if $\log p(\theta') + \log q(\theta \mid \theta') = 10000000.49$ and $\log p(\theta) + \log q(\theta' \mid \theta) = 10000000.51$, then the true acceptance probability should be $e^{-0.02} \approx 0.98$, but if these values are rounded before subtraction the computed acceptance probability is $e^{-1} \approx 0.37$.

Second, when $\log p(\theta)$ is a sum of many terms, small errors in summing these terms can accumulate. Figure 1 illustrates this phenomenon when computing two million independent Poisson log-likelihoods with different rate parameters. Summing the terms for each observation in F32 yields roughly Gaussian errors about 10 times larger than the nearly uniform errors obtained when summing in F64 and rounding the final result to F32. The errors due to summing in F32 are clearly large enough to affect the dynamics of the M-H algorithm, causing some states that might be rejected to be accepted and vice versa. In the next section, we will explore how these errors may introduce bias or degrade the efficiency of the M-H algorithm.

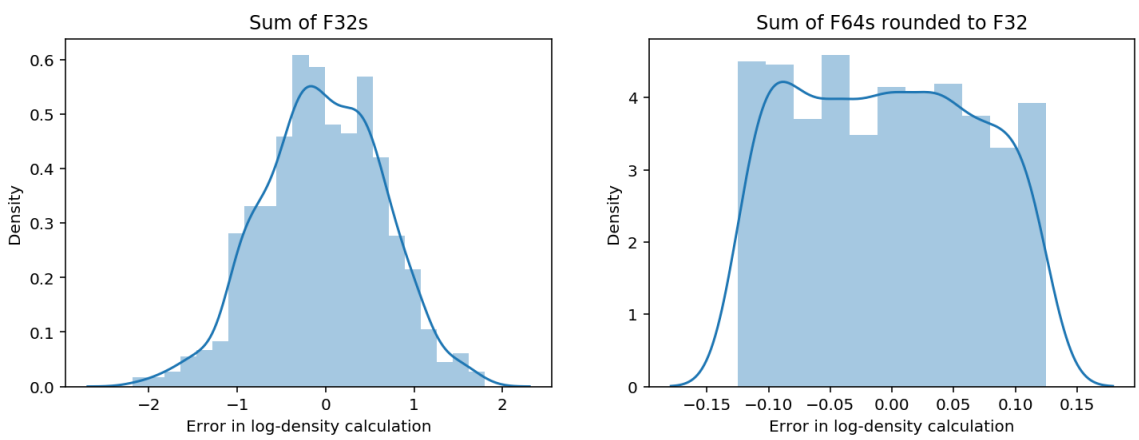

Figure 1: Errors when computing the sum of the log-likelihoods of two million Poisson random variables. NumPy code to generate the plots is in Appendix A.

3. Analysis of Metropolis-Hastings with Roundoff Error

In this section, we analyze the effects of roundoff error in the log-densities fed to the Metropolis-Hastings algorithm. We denote the state of the Markov chain as θ, the true target log-density as $\log p(\theta)$, and the computed target log-density with roundoff error ϵ as

$\log \hat{p}(\theta) = \log p(\theta) + \epsilon(\theta)$. Since $\epsilon(\theta)$ is obtained by rounding bounded floating-point numbers, it is also bounded, so we can define the normalizing constant $Z = \int_\theta \hat{p}(\theta) = \mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]$.

At each step, the algorithm proceeds from a state θ and cached $\log \hat{p}(\theta)$ to sample $\theta' \sim q(\cdot \mid \theta)$, computes the perturbed Metropolis-Hastings acceptance probability

$$\hat{\alpha} = \min\{1, \tfrac{\hat{p}(\theta')q(\theta|\theta')}{\hat{p}(\theta)q(\theta'|\theta)}\} = \min\{1, \tfrac{p(\theta')q(\theta|\theta')}{p(\theta)q(\theta'|\theta)} e^{\epsilon(\theta')-\epsilon(\theta)}\}, \tag{1}$$

and accepts the new state θ' with probability $\hat{\alpha}$.

This algorithm leaves the perturbed distribution $\frac{\hat{p}}{Z}$ invariant. If expectations of interest with respect to $\frac{\hat{p}}{Z}$ are close to their values under the true p, then the asymptotic bias of this algorithm will be small. Loosely speaking, this bias will be small if we are trying to estimate the expected value of some function $h(\theta)$ such that the average of $e^{\epsilon(\theta)}$ over any region in which $h(\theta)$ is nearly constant is approximately Z.

But if the variance of $\epsilon(\theta)$ is large, then the average acceptance rate $\hat{\alpha}$ may get very small, dramatically slowing down the algorithm. Intuitively, the issue is that $e^{\epsilon(\theta)}$ may have quite heavy tails, and so most of the mass in $\hat{p}$ will be concentrated on values of θ for which $e^{\epsilon(\theta)}$ are abnormally large. Unfortunately, there is no way to preferentially select states whose roundoff errors are large and positive, so the chain must wait until it gets a favorable error by chance. (Pseudo-marginal MCMC suffers from a very similar issue (Andrieu and Roberts, 2009).)

We can make this intuition a bit more quantitative. At stationarity, the expected acceptance probability is

$$\begin{aligned}\mathbb{E}_{\hat{p}}[\hat{\alpha}] &= \int_{\theta,\theta'} \frac{p(\theta)}{Z} e^{\epsilon(\theta)} q(\theta' \mid \theta) \min\left\{1, \frac{p(\theta')q(\theta \mid \theta')}{p(\theta)q(\theta' \mid \theta)} e^{\epsilon(\theta')-\epsilon(\theta)}\right\} d\theta d\theta' \\ &= \int_{\theta,\theta'} p(\theta)q(\theta' \mid \theta) \min\left\{\frac{e^{\epsilon(\theta)}}{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]}, \frac{p(\theta')q(\theta \mid \theta')}{p(\theta)q(\theta' \mid \theta)} \frac{e^{\epsilon(\theta')}}{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]}\right\} d\theta d\theta'.\end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Consider what happens if we have an ideal proposal distribution $q(\theta' \mid \theta) = p(\theta')$. Without roundoff, this would yield perfect samples and an acceptance rate of 1. But with roundoff, the acceptance rate is

$$\hat{\alpha}^\star \triangleq \int_{\theta,\theta'} p(\theta)p(\theta') \min\left\{\frac{e^{\epsilon(\theta)}}{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]}, \frac{e^{\epsilon(\theta')}}{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]}\right\} d\theta d\theta' \tag{3}$$

$$= \mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]^{-1} \int_0^\infty p(\min\{e^{\epsilon(\theta)}, e^{\epsilon(\theta')}\} = m) m dm \tag{4}$$

$$= \mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]^{-1} \int_0^\infty 2p(e^{\epsilon(\theta)} = m) P(e^{\epsilon(\theta)} > m) m dm \tag{5}$$

$$\leq \mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]^{-1} \int_0^\infty 2p(e^{\epsilon(\theta)} = m) \frac{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)/2}]}{\sqrt{m}} m dm \tag{6}$$

$$= \frac{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)/2}]^2}{\mathbb{E}_p[e^{\epsilon(\theta)}]} \leq 1, \tag{7}$$

where the first bound follows from applying Markov's inequality to $e^{\epsilon(\theta)/2}$ and the second follows from Jensen's inequality ($\mathbb{E}[x^2] \geq \mathbb{E}[x]^2$, with $x = e^{\epsilon(\theta)/2}$).

How much less than 1 this upper bound on the acceptance rate is depends on both the scale and the tails of the distribution of ϵ. Two cases are of particular interest: first, where ϵ follows a normal distribution (e.g., due to summing many independent roundoff errors), and second, where ϵ follows a uniform distribution (e.g., due to rounding an accurately computed log-density to fit into a single-precision float). In both of these cases we can compute the exact acceptance rate $\hat{\alpha}^\star$.

The Gaussian case: If $\epsilon \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu, \sigma)$, then equation 5 can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{\alpha}^\star &= e^{-\mu-\sigma^2/2} \int_\epsilon 2\phi(\epsilon)\Phi(-\epsilon)e^{\sigma(\epsilon+\mu)}d\epsilon \\ &= e^{-\sigma^2/2} \int_\epsilon 2\phi(\epsilon)\Phi(-\epsilon)e^{\sigma\epsilon}d\epsilon, \end{aligned} \tag{8}$$

where $\phi(\epsilon)$ and $\Phi(\epsilon)$ are the pdf and cdf of a standard normal distribution. Since $2\phi(x)\Phi(-x)$ is the pdf of a skew-normal distribution with shape parameter $\alpha = -1$, we can use the skew-normal's moment-generating function to compute the integral:

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{\alpha}^\star &= e^{-\sigma^2/2}\mathrm{M}(\sigma; -1) \\ &= e^{-\sigma^2/2}2e^{\sigma^2/2}\Phi(-\sigma/\sqrt{2}) \\ &= 2\Phi(-\sigma/\sqrt{2}). \end{aligned} \tag{9}$$

If σ is close to zero, then a first-order Taylor approximation implies that the acceptance rate will be

$$\hat{\alpha}^\star = 2\Phi(-\sigma/\sqrt{2}) = 1 - \frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}}\sigma + O(\sigma^3), \tag{10}$$

so small amounts of roundoff error will not hurt the acceptance rate too badly. However, as σ gets large, the acceptance rate approaches zero very rapidly, as Figure 2 shows. For example, if $\sigma = 2$ then $\hat{\alpha}^\star \approx 0.16$; if $\sigma = 4$ then $\hat{\alpha}^\star \approx 0.005$.

The uniform case: If $\epsilon \sim \mathrm{Uniform}([\mu - \sigma, \mu + \sigma])$, then equation 5 can be written as

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{\alpha}^\star &= \left(\frac{1}{2\sigma}\int_{-\sigma}^{\sigma} e^{\mu+\epsilon}d\epsilon\right)^{-1} \frac{1}{2\sigma}\int_{-\sigma}^{\sigma}\left(1 - \frac{\epsilon}{\sigma}\right)e^{\mu+\epsilon}d\epsilon \\ &= \frac{1}{\sigma} + 1 - \frac{1}{\tanh(\sigma)}. \end{aligned} \tag{11}$$

For small σ, this is $1 - \frac{\sigma}{3} + O(\sigma^3)$. For large σ, the tanh saturates and it becomes $\frac{1}{\sigma}$. This is a much more graceful degradation in acceptance rate than the Gaussian case, but for large roundoff errors it may still be quite bad.

In summary, we have argued that roundoff errors in computing the log-density that is used in the Metropolis-Hastings accept-reject step may or may not induce bias, but they can aggressively degrade the acceptance rate to the point that the algorithm becomes unusable.

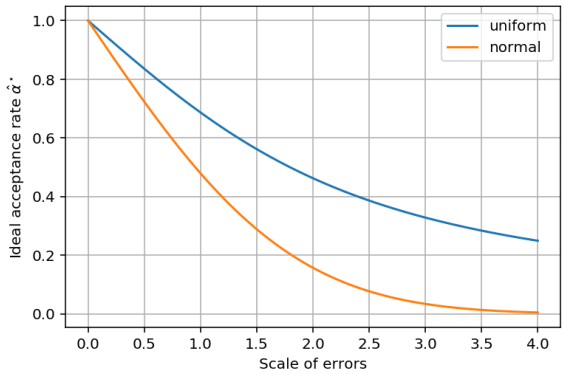

Figure 2: Average acceptance probability of the ideal M-H proposal $q(\theta' \mid \theta) = p(\theta')$ assuming the log-density is corrupted by uniformly or normally distributed roundoff error as in Equation (11) and Equation (9).

4. Discussion and Practical Considerations

We have illustrated a way in which roundoff error can severely degrade the performance of Metropolis-Hastings procedures, leading in some cases to bias and in others to such low acceptance rates that the method is useless. Unfortunately these issues seem most pronounced in precisely the sort of large-scale problems that motivate the use of cheap, low-precision arithmetic.

We have found a few of ways of diagnosing these roundoff issues. The simplest is of course to run the algorithm in F64 and see if anything changes, but not all implementations make that easy. One can also inspect the values of $\log p(\theta)$ that the algorithm is generating; if they have more than six digits to the left of the decimal point, then there may be cause for concern. Finally, most Metropolis-Hastings algorithms have some kind of step size parameter; in an exact-arithmetic implementation, as the step size approaches zero, the acceptance rate would go to one. If it is difficult or impossible to drive the acceptance rate to one by reducing the step size, that is a warning sign that numerical issues may be present. Likewise, if one is employing a step-size adaptation scheme that targets a particular acceptance rate, and instead of converging it drives the step size to zero, then one should suspect roundoff error as the culprit.

There are multiple ways to address roundoff issues. A simple approach is to compute the terms being summed in $\log p(\theta)$ in F32, but convert them to F64 before the final (relatively cheap) summation. If F64 summation is not available or convenient, one can also use methods like Kahan summation to eliminate catastrophic cancellations. Finally, in many cases it is more accurate to compute a sum of differences than a difference of sums, e.g., $\sum_n \log p(x_n \mid \theta') - \log p(x_n \mid \theta)$ instead of $(\sum_n \log p(x_n \mid \theta')) - (\sum_n \log p(x_n \mid \theta))$; however, this approach makes caching of previous results more memory-intensive and is somewhat cumbersome, since it breaks the abstraction of a scalar log-density.

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Appendix A. Code to generate figure 1

```
def poisson_logpdf(x, rate):
  return (-scipy.special.gammaln(x+1) + x * np.log(rate) - rate).sum()
x = np.random.poisson(1, size=2000000)
sum_errors = []
final_roundoff_errors = []
for i in range(1000):
  rate = np.exp(0.2 * np.random.randn())
  logpdf64 = poisson_logpdf(x, rate).sum()
  logpdf32 = poisson_logpdf(x.astype(np.float32), rate.astype(np.float32)).sum()
  sum_errors.append(logpdf32 - logpdf64)
  final_roundoff_errors.append(logpdf64.astype(np.float32) - logpdf64)

plt.figure(figsize=[12, 4])
plt.subplot(1, 2, 1)
plt.title('Sum of F32s')
sns.distplot(sum_errors)
plt.xlabel('Error in log-density calculation')
plt.subplot(1, 2, 2)
plt.title('Sum of F64s rounded to F32')
sns.distplot(final_roundoff_errors)
plt.xlabel('Error in log-density calculation')
sns.distplot(errors)
```