

Imitating Cost-Constrained Behaviors in Reinforcement Learning

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Abstract

Complex planning and scheduling problems have long been solved using various optimization or heuristic approaches. In recent years, imitation learning that aims to learn from expert demonstrations has been proposed as a viable alternative to solving these problems. Generally speaking, imitation learning is designed to learn either the reward (or preference) model or directly the behavioral policy by observing the behavior of an expert. Existing work in imitation learning and inverse reinforcement learning has focused on imitation primarily in unconstrained settings (e.g., no limit on fuel consumed by the vehicle). However, in many real-world domains, the behavior of an expert is governed not only by reward (or preference) but also by constraints. For instance, decisions on self-driving delivery vehicles are dependent not only on the route preferences/rewards (depending on past demand data) but also on the fuel in the vehicle and the time available. In such problems, imitation learning is challenging as decisions are not only dictated by the reward model but are also dependent on a cost-constrained model. In this paper, we provide multiple methods that match expert distributions in the presence of trajectory cost constraints through (a) Lagrangian-based method; (b) Meta-gradients to find a good trade-off between expected return and minimizing constraint violation; and (c) Cost-violation-based alternating gradient. We empirically show that leading imitation learning approaches imitate cost-constrained behaviors poorly and our meta-gradient-based approach achieves the best performance.

Introduction

Complex planning and scheduling problems have long been studied in the literature using a wide variety of optimization algorithms and heuristics. One generic way to think about the process of solving these complex problems is to first define a set of states, where a state represents the minimal amount of information required to describe a planning or scheduling instance; then for each state, compute the recommended action by optimizing certain well-defined performance measure. A comprehensive list of (state, action recommendation) tuples is then called the policy for the solved problem and can be used in practice easily by looking up the encountered states.

An alternative paradigm to the above classical approach is to directly “learn” from an expert. More specifically, with a few expert-demonstrated traces of actions, try to generalize and derive actionable policies. Such an approach is generally called “imitation learning”, which aims to replicate expert behaviors by directly observing human demonstrations, eliminating the need for designing explicit reward signals as in reinforcement learning (RL) (Abbeel and Ng 2004). This idea has been successfully applied in domains such as robotics (Fang et al. 2019), autonomous vehicles (Kuefler et al. 2017), and game AI (Hussein et al. 2017). Typically, this is achieved through techniques such as behavioral cloning (Bain and Sammut 1995), inverse RL (Ng, Russell et al. 2000), and generative inverse reinforcement learning (GAIL) (Ho and Ermon 2016).

The previous research in the fields of imitation learning and inverse reinforcement learning has primarily concentrated on mimicking human behaviors in unconstrained environments, such as mimicking driving a vehicle without any limitations on fuel consumption by the vehicle. However, in many practical planning and scheduling scenarios, experts consider not only rewards or preferences but also limitations or constraints. For example, the decisions made by a self-driving delivery vehicle are not only based on route preferences or rewards, which are derived from past demand data but also on the amount of fuel/power available in the vehicle. As another example, when an agent is being trained to drive a car on a race track, the expert demonstrations that the agent is mimicking involve high-speed driving and precision maneuvering, which are critical for success in a race. However, it is also essential for the agent to adhere to safety constraints, such as staying within the track’s boundaries and avoiding collisions with other vehicles. These safety constraints differ from the reward function, which may focus on achieving a fast lap time or winning the race. Therefore, the agent must strike a balance between the goal of imitating the expert demonstrations and the need to adhere to the safety constraints in order to successfully complete the task.

In scenarios where the decision-making process is influenced by both a reward model and a cost constraint model, the implementation of imitation learning becomes significantly more complex. This is because the decisions made are not solely based on the reward model, but also take into consideration the limitations imposed by the cost constraint

model. To that end, we provide a new imitation learning problem in cost-constrained environments.

Our work is closely related to Malik et al. (2021) and Cheng et al. (2023). In Malik et al. (2021), cost constraints have to be learned from expert trajectories in scenarios where the reward function is already specified. On the other hand, in Cheng et al. (2023), both safety constraint (maximum cost limit) and cost signals are known and provided, while the reward signal remains undisclosed.

The major differences between our proposed work and the above two past studies are that we assume cost signals (from sensors) from the environment are known and provided, but the safety constraint (maximum cost limit) is not given. In other words, we assume that we have the necessary sensors to monitor cost signals (e.g., battery level and temperature of an EV), yet we do not know the constraints on these sensor values (e.g., safety ranges on battery level and temperature).

In terms of the solution approach, our work is similar to Cheng et al. (2023) in that we also utilize the combination of the Lagrangian-base method and the GAIL framework (Ho and Ermon 2016). However, since we do not assume knowledge of the safety constraint, we cannot include the maximum cost limit in our objective function during training.

The major challenges we plan to address with this paper are approaches that could execute imitation learning while ensuring cost threshold constraint, which is revealed only via the observations of expert trajectories. Our key contributions are summarized as follows:

- First, we formulate the cost-constrained imitation learning problem which represents the challenge of imitation learning in cost-constrained environments (where cost signals are known).
- We propose three methods to address the cost-constrained imitation learning problems. First, we design a Lagrangian-based method utilizing a three-way gradient update to solve the cost-constrained imitation learning problem. We then provide a meta-gradient approach that is able to tune the Lagrangian penalties of the first approach to significantly improve the performance. Finally, we use a cost-violation-based alternating gradient approach which has a different gradient update depending on the current solution feasibility.
- To further validate the effectiveness of our proposed method, we conducted extensive evaluations in Safety Gym environments (Ray, Achiam, and Amodei 2019) and MuJoCo environments (Todorov, Erez, and Tassa 2012). Our numerical evaluations show that the ensemble of our three proposed approaches can effectively imitate expert behavior while satisfying cost constraints.

Background and Related Work

In this section, we describe the two problem models of relevance in this paper, namely Constrained MDPs and Imitation Learning. We also briefly review related work.

Constrained Markov Decision Process

Reinforcement Learning problems are characterized by an underlying Markov Decision Process (MDP), which is de-

finied by the tuple $(\mathcal{S}, \mathcal{A}, \mathcal{R}, \mathcal{P})$. Where \mathcal{S} represents the set of states, \mathcal{A} represents the set of actions. The reward function, $\mathcal{R} : \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \mapsto \mathbb{R}$, provides a quantitative measure of how well the system is performing based on the current state and action. The transition function, $\mathcal{P} : \mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A} \times \mathcal{S} \mapsto [0, 1]$, defines the probability of transitioning from one state to another, given the current state and action taken. Specifically, the probability of transitioning from state s to s' , given that action a is taken, is represented by $\mathcal{P}(s'|s, a)$. A feasible set of policies, denoted as Π , contains all possible policies that can be implemented in the system. The objective of MDP is to find an optimal policy, $\pi \in \Pi$, by maximizing the reward-based objective function, which is defined as follows:

$$\max_{\pi \in \Pi} \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t r(s_t, a_t) \right]. \quad (1)$$

In this work, we examine the scenario in which agents aim to optimize their rewards while adhering to policy-based cost constraints. This leads to an extension of the traditional MDP framework referred to as the Constrained Markov Decision Process (CMDP) (Altman 1999). The objective in a CMDP problem is succinctly formulated as:

$$\begin{aligned} \max_{\pi \in \Pi} \quad & \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t r(s_t, a_t) \right] \\ \text{s.t.} \quad & \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t d(s_t, a_t) \right] \leq d_0, \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

where $d(s, a)$ is the cost associated with taking action a in state s and is independent of the reward function, $r(s, a)$. d_0 is the expected cost threshold for any selected policy. There have been numerous approaches proposed for solving Constrained MDPs (Satija, Amortila, and Pineau 2020; Pathmanathan and Varakantham 2023; Hoang, Mai, and Varakantham 2024), when the reward and transition models are not known *a priori*.

Imitation Learning

Methods of Reinforcement Learning require clearly defined and observable reward signals, which provide the agent with feedback on their performance. However, in many real-world scenarios, defining these rewards can be very challenging. Imitation learning, on the other hand, offers a more realistic approach by allowing agents to learn behavior in an environment through observing expert demonstrations, without the need for accessing a defined reward signal.

An effective method for addressing imitation learning challenges is Behavior Cloning (BC) (Bain and Sammut 1995). This approach utilizes the states and actions of a demonstrator as training data, allowing the agent to replicate the expert's policy (Pomerleau 1991). One of the advantages of this method is that it does not require the agent to actively interact with the environment, instead, it operates as a form of supervised learning, similar to classification or regression. Despite its simplicity, BC is known to suffer from a significant drawback: the compounding error caused by covariate shift (Ross, Gordon, and Bagnell 2011). This occurs when minor errors accumulate over time, ultimately resulting in a significantly different state distribution.

Another approach, Inverse Reinforcement Learning (IRL) (Ng, Russell et al. 2000) aims to identify the underlying reward function that explains the observed behavior of an expert. Once the reward function is determined, a standard Reinforcement Learning algorithm can be used to obtain the optimal policy. The reward function is typically defined as a linear (Ng, Russell et al. 2000; Abbeel and Ng 2004) or convex (Syed, Bowling, and Schapire 2008) combination of the state features, and the learned policy is assumed to have the maximum entropy (Ziebart et al. 2008) or maximum causal entropy (Ziebart, Bagnell, and Dey 2010). However, many IRL methods are computationally expensive and may produce multiple possible formulations for the true reward function. To address these challenges, Generative Adversarial Imitation Learning (GAIL) (Ho and Ermon 2016) was proposed. GAIL directly learns a policy by using a discriminator to distinguish between expert and learned actions, with the output of the discriminator serving as the reward signal. A more recent method, known as Inverse soft-Q Learning (IQ-Learn) (Garg et al. 2021), takes a different approach by learning a single Q-function that implicitly represents both the reward and policy, thereby avoiding the need for adversarial training. With their state-of-the-art performance in various applications, we designate GAIL and IQ-learn as baselines for our algorithms.

We now describe the imitation learning problem and GAIL approach here as it serves as the basis for our method. The learner’s goal is to find a policy, denoted as π , that performs at least as well as an expert policy, denoted as π_E , with respect to an unknown reward function, denoted as $r(s, a)$. For a given policy $\pi \in \Pi$, we define its occupancy measure, denoted as $\rho_\pi \in \Gamma$, as (Puterman 2014)

$$\rho_\pi(s, a) = \pi(a|s) \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t P(s_t = s | \pi)$$

The occupancy measure represents the distribution of state-action pairs that an agent encounters when navigating the environment with the specified policy π . It is important to note that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the set of policies, Π , and the set of occupancy measures, Γ . Therefore, an imitation learning problem can be equivalently formulated as a matching learning problem between the occupancy measure of the learner’s policy, ρ_π , and the occupancy measure of the expert’s policy, ρ_{π_E} . In general, the objective can be succinctly represented as the task of finding a policy that closely matches the occupancy measure of the expert’s policy, which is represented as:

$$\min_{\pi} -H(\pi) + \psi^*(\rho_\pi - \rho_{\pi_E}), \quad (3)$$

where $H(\pi) \triangleq \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[-\log \pi(a|s)]$ is the causal entropy of the policy π , which is defined as the expected value of the negative logarithm of the probability of choosing an action a given a state s , under the distribution of the policy π . Additionally, the distance measure between the state-action distribution of the policy π , represented by ρ_π , and the expert’s state-action distribution, represented by ρ_{π_E} , is represented by the symbol ψ^* . Specifically, the distance measure

(Jensen-Shannon divergence) employed by the GAIL framework is defined as follows:

$$\psi^*(\rho_\pi - \rho_{\pi_E}) = \max_D \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[\log D(s, a)] + \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E}[\log(1 - D(s, a))] \quad (4)$$

The GAIL method utilizes a combination of imitation learning and generative adversarial networks, where $D \in (0, 1)^{\mathcal{S} \times \mathcal{A}}$ acts as the discriminator. Through this formalism, the method trains a generator, represented by π_θ , to generate state-action pairs that the discriminator attempts to distinguish from expert demonstrations. The optimal policy is achieved when the discriminator is unable to distinguish between the data generated by the generator and the expert data.

In our problem, as we aim to address the imitation learning problem within the constraints of an MDP, we have employed a unique distance measure that diverges from the traditional GAIL framework. This approach allows us to more effectively navigate the complexities of the constrained MDP setting and achieve our desired outcome.

Lagrangian Method

In this section, we first describe the problem of cost-constrained imitation learning and outline our approach to compute the policy that mimics expert behaviors while satisfying the cost constraints.

We work in the γ -discounted infinite horizon setting, and we denote the expected reward and cost in association with policy $\pi \in \Pi$ as: $\mathbb{E}_{\pi}[r(s, a)] \triangleq \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t r(s_t, a_t)]$ and $\mathbb{E}_{\pi}[d(s, a)] \triangleq \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t d(s_t, a_t)]$, where $s_0 \sim p_0$, $a_t \sim \pi(\cdot|s_t)$, and $s_{t+1} \sim \mathcal{P}(\cdot|s_t, a_t)$ for $t \geq 0$. Formally, the Cost-Constrained Imitation Learning problem is a combination of the CMDP problem (2) and the Imitation Learning problem (3), and can be characterized as:

$$\begin{aligned} \min_{\pi} \quad & -H(\pi) + \psi^*(\rho_\pi - \rho_{\pi_E}) \\ \text{s.t.} \quad & \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[d(s, a)] \leq \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E}[d(s, a)] \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

The imitation learning objective includes two terms: one maximizes the policy’s entropy, ensuring all feasible alternatives are considered; the other minimizes the disparity between occupation measures of the policy and expert trajectories. The constraint ensures that the expected cost using the policy must be less than that of expert trajectories. We assume that $d(s, a)$ is known, but the reward is not.

Our generative approach to computing the policy that mimics the behavior of the expert within cost constraints relies on computing a solution to the unconstrained objective function of Equation (6) below. The theoretical justification for choosing this objective function is provided in the Appendix, and our analysis is based on the GAIL framework. Equation (6) is composed of three optimizations:

- Minimize the distance between state, action distributions of the new policy, π_θ , and expert policy, π_E . This is transformed into the loss associated with a discriminator, D_ω , which discriminates between (state, action) pairs from experts, and (state, action) pairs generated by the new policy π_θ .

- Maximize the entropy of the new policy, π_θ , to ensure none of the correct policies are ignored.
- Minimize the cost constraint violations corresponding to the new policy, π_θ .

$$L(\omega, \lambda, \theta) \triangleq \min_{\omega, \lambda} \max_{\theta} \mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} [\log D_\omega(s, a)] + \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E} [\log(1 - D_\omega(s, a))] + \lambda (\mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} [d(s, a)] - \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E} [d(s, a)]) - \beta H(\pi_\theta), \quad (6)$$

where θ represents the parameters of the policy, β is the parameter corresponding to the causal entropy (since we maximize entropy similar to imitation learning) and finally, λ is the Lagrangian multiplier corresponding to the cost constraint. $H(\pi_\theta) \triangleq \mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} [-\log \pi_\theta(a|s)]$ is the casual entropy of policy π_θ . The given expert policy is represented by π_E , and a known cost function, represented by d , is also incorporated into the objective function.

Given the three optimization components, we do not choose one of the three but instead compute a saddle point $(\theta, \omega, \lambda)$ for (6). To accomplish this, we employ a parameterized policy, represented by π_θ , with adjustable weights θ , as well as a discriminator network, represented by D_ω , which maps states and actions to a value between 0 and 1, and has its own set of adjustable weights ω . The Lagrangian multiplier, denoted by λ , is for penalizing the number of cost constraint violations.

To obtain the saddle point, we update the parameters of policy, discriminator, and Lagrangian multiplier sequentially:

Updating ω : The gradient of (6) with respect to ω is calculated as:

$$\nabla_\omega L(\omega, \lambda, \theta) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} [\nabla_\omega \log D_\omega(s, a)] + \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E} [\nabla_\omega \log(1 - D_\omega(s, a))] \quad (7)$$

We utilize the Adam gradient step method (Kingma and Ba 2015) on the variable ω , targeting the maximization of (6) in relation to D .

Updating θ : To update policy parameters, we adopt the Trust Region Policy Optimization (TRPO) method (Schulman et al. 2015). The theoretical foundation of the TRPO update process involves utilizing a specific algorithm to improve the overall performance of the policy by optimizing the parameters within a defined trust region:

$$\theta_{k+1} = \arg \max_{\theta} \mathcal{L}(\theta_k, \theta), \quad s.t. \quad \bar{D}_{KL}(\theta || \theta_k) \leq \delta. \quad (8)$$

The key challenge in applying the TRPO update process is the computation of the surrogate advantage, denoted by $\mathcal{L}(\theta_k, \theta)$. It is a metric that quantifies the relative performance of a new policy π_θ in comparison to an existing policy π_{θ_k} , based on data collected from the previous policy:

$$\mathcal{L}(\theta_k, \theta) = \mathbb{E}_{s, a \sim \pi_{\theta_k}} \left[\frac{\pi_\theta(a|s)}{\pi_{\theta_k}(a|s)} (A_r^{\pi_{\theta_k}}(s, a) - \lambda A_d^{\pi_{\theta_k}}(s, a)) \right] \quad (9)$$

We do not have a reward function to compute the advantage and hence we utilize the output of the discriminator, represented by $-\log D_\omega(s, a)$, as the reward signal. Subsequently, we employ the Generalized Advantage Estimation

(GAE) method outlined in Schulman et al. (2016) to calculate the advantage of the reward, $A_r^{\pi_{\theta_k}}(s, a)$. Additionally, we also calculate the advantage pertaining to cost, denoted as $A_d^{\pi_{\theta_k}}(s, a)$, by utilizing the GAE method, as we know the cost function.

The average KL-divergence, represented by $\bar{D}_{KL}(\theta || \theta_k)$, between policies across states visited by the previous policy, can be computed as:

$$\bar{D}_{KL}(\theta || \theta_k) = \mathbb{E}_{s \sim \pi_{\theta_k}} D_{KL}(\pi_\theta(\cdot|s) || \pi_{\theta_k}(\cdot|s)) \quad (10)$$

Updating ϕ_r, ϕ_d : We do an Adam gradient step on ϕ_r (reward value network parameters), ϕ_d (cost value network parameters) to minimize the mean-squared error of reward value and cost value, as we minimize these two loss functions:

$$\begin{aligned} \min_{\phi_r} \mathbb{E}_{s \sim \pi_{\theta_k}} (V_{\phi_r}^r(s_t) - \hat{R}_t^r)^2 \\ \min_{\phi_d} \mathbb{E}_{s \sim \pi_{\theta_k}} (V_{\phi_d}^d(s_t) - \hat{R}_t^d)^2 \end{aligned} \quad (11)$$

Here \hat{R}_t^r, \hat{R}_t^d are the reward to go and cost to go, which are calculated by the GAE method.

Updating λ : We do an Adam gradient step on λ to increase (6), the gradient of (6) with respect to λ is calculated as:

$$\nabla_\lambda L(\omega, \lambda, \theta) = (\mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} [d(s, a)] - \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E} [d(s, a)]) \quad (12)$$

Algorithm 1 shows the pseudocode for our approach, Cost-Constrained Lagrangian (CCIL).

Meta-Gradient for Lagrangian Approach

In this section, we introduce a meta-gradient approach to improve the Lagrangian method introduced in the previous section by applying cross-validation to optimize the Lagrangian multipliers. We call this approach MALM.

Meta-gradient is a strategy designed for the optimization of hyperparameters, such as the discount factor and learning rates in Reinforcement Learning problems. This approach involves the simultaneous execution of online cross-validation while pursuing the optimization objective of reinforcement learning, such as the maximization of expected return (Xu, van Hasselt, and Silver 2018; Calian et al. 2021). The goal is to optimize both inner and outer losses. The update of parameters on the inner loss is to update the parameters of the policy. The outer loss can be based on measures such as policy gradient loss and temporal difference loss, and is optimized by updating hyperparameters (Calian et al. 2021) in constrained RL problems, and using Distributed Distributional Deterministic Policy Gradients (D4PG) (Barth-Maroon et al. 2018) algorithm framework. The critic loss is used in Barth-Maroon et al. (2018) as the outer loss function to optimize the hyperparameters.

Instead of optimizing the hyperparameters, the key idea of MALM is to update the Lagrangian multiplier such that there is a better balance between reward maximization and cost constraint enforcement. Specifically, we use the outer loss that is defined as follows:

$$L_{outer}(\lambda) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi_\theta} (A^r(s, a) - \lambda d(s, a))^2 \quad (13)$$

Algorithm 1: Cost-Constrained Lagrangian (CCIL)

Input: initial parameters of policy θ , reward value network ϕ_r , cost value network ϕ_d , discriminator network ω , batch size K , a set of expert trajectories $\Phi_E = \{\tau_E \sim \pi_E\}$, initial Lagrangian multipliers λ , entropy parameter β , learning rates $\alpha_r, \alpha_d, \alpha_\lambda, \alpha_\omega$.

Output: Optimal policy π_θ

- 1: Compute the average cost of expert trajectories: $J_E = \frac{1}{|\Phi_E|} \sum_{\tau \in \Phi_E} \sum_{t=1}^T d_t$
 - 2: **for** $k = 1, 2, \dots$ **do**
 - 3: Collect set of learner’s trajectories $\Phi_k = \{\tau_i\}$ by running policy π_{θ_k} for K time steps.
 - 4: Collect the reward r_t of K time steps by using the discriminator output: $r_t = -\log(D_\omega(s_t, a_t))$
 - 5: Compute $V_{\phi_r}^r(s_t)$ and $V_{\phi_d}^d(s_t)$ of K time steps.
 - 6: Compute the reward and cost advantage $A^r(s_t, a_t)$ and $A^d(s_t, a_t)$, reward to go \hat{R}_t^r and cost to go \hat{R}_t^d of K time steps by using GAE.
 - 7: Compute the average episode cost of learner’s trajectories: $J_k = \frac{1}{|\Phi_k|} \sum_{\tau \in \Phi_k} \sum_{t=1}^T d_t$
 - 8: Update policy by using TRPO rule:
 $\theta' = \arg \max_{\theta} \sum_{t=1}^K \frac{\pi_\theta(a_t|s_t)}{\pi_{\theta_k}(a_t|s_t)} (A^r(s_t, a_t) - \lambda A^d(s_t, a_t)) + \beta H(\pi_{\theta_k})$
 - 9: Update reward value network:
 $\phi_r' \leftarrow \phi_r - \frac{1}{K} \sum_{t=1}^K \alpha_r \nabla_{\phi_r} (V_{\phi_r}^r(s_t) - \hat{R}_t^r)^2$
 - 10: Update cost value network:
 $\phi_d' \leftarrow \phi_d - \frac{1}{K} \sum_{t=1}^K \alpha_d \nabla_{\phi_d} (V_{\phi_d}^d(s_t) - \hat{R}_t^d)^2$
 - 11: Update discriminator network:
 $\omega' \leftarrow \omega + \frac{1}{K} \sum_{t=1}^K \alpha_\omega (\nabla_\omega [\log(D_\omega(s_t, a_t))] + \nabla_\omega [\log(1 - D_\omega(s_t, a_t))])$
 - 12: Update Lagrangian multipliers:
 $\lambda' \leftarrow \lambda + \alpha_\lambda (J_k - J_E)$
 - 13: $\theta \leftarrow \theta', \phi_r \leftarrow \phi_r', \phi_d \leftarrow \phi_d', \omega \leftarrow \omega', \lambda \leftarrow \lambda'$.
 - 14: **end for**
-

Every batch is divided into training and validation data sets. The parameter update equations for the training data set are the same as described in the Lagrangian-based method (Equations (8) – (12)), and for the validation data set, we update the Lagrangian multiplier by minimizing the above outer loss function. MALM is similar to Algorithm 1 except that from lines 7 to 12, we update policy parameters, discriminator parameters, and Lagrangian multipliers based on the training data set. We also have an additional procedure to update the Lagrangian multipliers by minimizing the outer loss function based on the validation data set (see the Appendix for detailed pseudocode).

Cost-Violation-based Alternating Gradient

We now describe our third method, Cost-Violation-based Alternating Gradient (CVAG), which does not rely on Lagrangian multipliers. Like previous methods, this method also maintains a policy network, θ , reward value network, ϕ_r , and cost value network, ϕ_d . The key novelty of this approach is in doing a feasibility check-based gradient update that is fairly intuitive. If the average episode cost of the

learner does not exceed the average episode cost of experts (cost constraint), then we update the policy parameters towards the direction of maximizing the return, which would be the following equation in TRPO:

$$\mathcal{L}(\theta_k, \theta) = \max_{\theta} \mathbb{E}_{s, a \sim \pi_{\theta_k}} \left[\frac{\pi_\theta(a|s)}{\pi_{\theta_k}(a|s)} A_r^{\pi_{\theta_k}}(s, a) \right] \quad (14)$$

Otherwise, we update the policy towards the direction of minimizing the costs.

$$\mathcal{L}(\theta_k, \theta) = \min_{\theta} \mathbb{E}_{s, a \sim \pi_{\theta_k}} \left[\frac{\pi_\theta(a|s)}{\pi_{\theta_k}(a|s)} A_d^{\pi_{\theta_k}}(s, a) \right] \quad (15)$$

The detailed pseudocode is provided in the Appendix.

Experiments

In this section, we compare our approaches against leading approaches for imitation learning (IL), including GAIL (Ho and Ermon 2016), IQ-Learn (Garg et al. 2021), Behavioral Cloning (BC) (Bain and Sammut 1995), and LGAIL (Cheng et al. 2023) in cost-constrained environments. This is to illustrate that a new approach is needed to mimic expert behaviors when there are unknown cost constraints. As we will soon demonstrate, all baselines suffer from either extensive cost constraint violations or low reward.

Setup

Environments and Cost Definition. We selected Safety Gym (Ray, Achiam, and Amodei 2019) and MuJoCo (Todorov, Erez, and Tassa 2012), two well-known environments from the literature for our evaluation purpose.

The Safety Gym environment is a standard platform for evaluating constrained RL algorithms. Each instance of this environment features a robot tasked with navigating a cluttered space to achieve a goal, all while adhering to specific constraints governing its interactions with objects and surrounding areas. In our experiments, there are three robotic agents (Point, Car, and Doggo) and two task types (Goal and Button), resulting in a total of six unique scenarios. The difficulty level for these environments is standardized to 1. Throughout each timestep, the environment provides distinct cost signals for various unsafe elements, each linked to an associated constraint. Additionally, an aggregate cost signal is provided, encapsulating the overall impact of the agent’s interactions with unsafe elements. The cost functions are straightforward indicators, evaluating whether an unsafe interaction has occurred ($c_t = 1$ if the agent engages in an unsafe action, otherwise $c_t = 0$).

In order to illustrate the robustness of our methods, we also adopt MuJoCo for its wide array of continuous control tasks, such as Walker2d and Swimmer. These tasks are frequently employed to assess RL and IL algorithms. For the reward, we utilized the default MuJoCo environment settings, however, as the MuJoCo environment does not have built-in cost constraints like in Safety Gym, we introduce constraints on features of the state space and action space. Table 1 shows the descriptions of cost and corresponding tasks in both MuJoCo and Safety Gym environments.

Task	Observation Space	Action Space	Dataset Size	Reward	Cost	Safety Coefficient
PointGoal1	60	2	10	18.77 ± 4.64	51.1 ± 3.36	NA
PointButton1	76	2	10	18.56 ± 3.83	93.5 ± 7.8	NA
CarGoal1	72	2	10	25.73 ± 2.44	45.2 ± 6.35	NA
CarButton1	88	2	10	11.84 ± 1.36	196.6 ± 25.44	NA
DoggoGoal1	104	12	10	4.62 ± 1.55	57.9 ± 9.46	NA
DoggoButton1	120	12	10	3.32 ± 1.2	181.7 ± 15.48	NA
HalfCheetah-v3	17	6	10	4132.72 ± 132.82	547.5 ± 8.1	0.4
Hopper-v3	11	3	10	3594.04 ± 1.78	433.6 ± 2.24	0.001
Ant-v3	27	8	10	1263.43 ± 142.14	653.2 ± 78.82	2
Swimmer-v3	8	2	10	110.47 ± 1.01	63.8 ± 1.08	1
Walker2d-v3	17	6	10	1781.42 ± 19.06	130.1 ± 21.1	1
Humanoid-v3	376	17	10	1744.53 ± 257.22	206.6 ± 29	0.2

Table 1: Environments and expert trajectories.

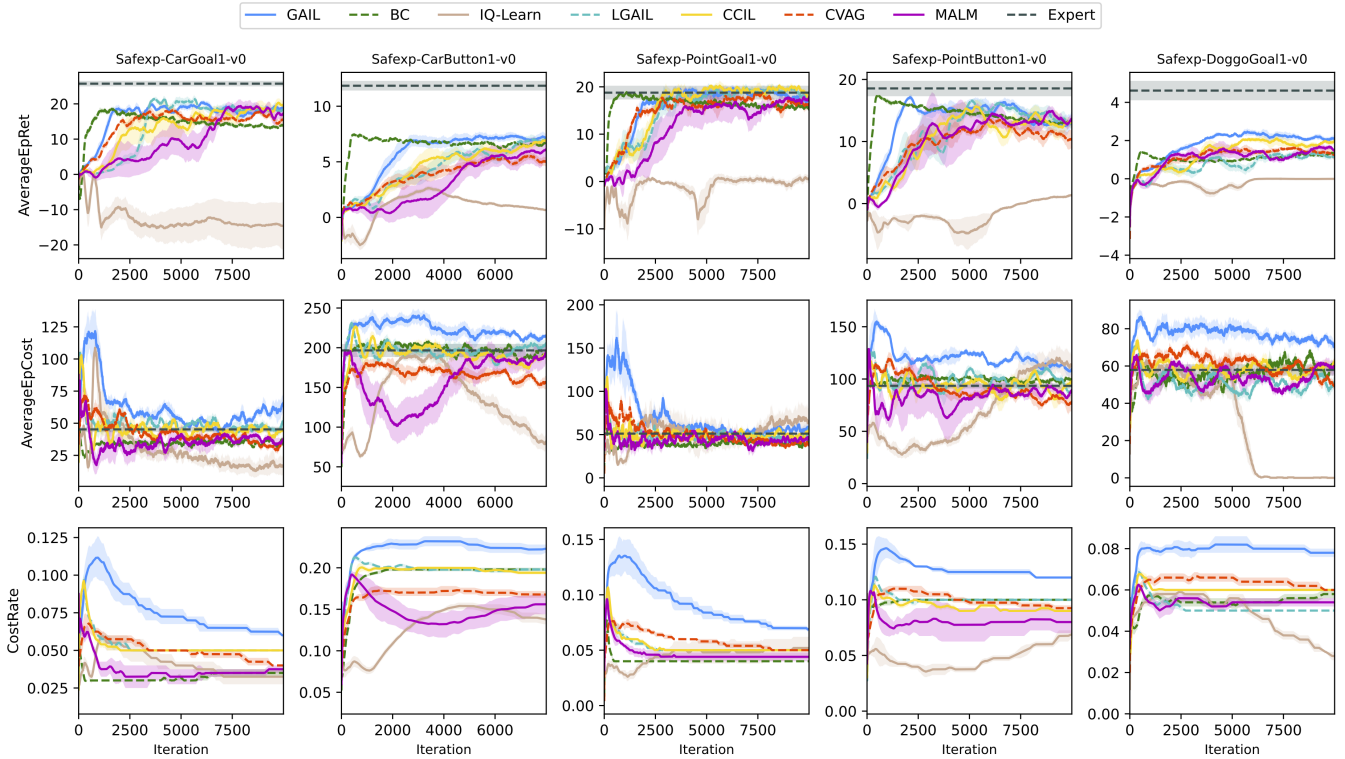


Figure 1: Performance of Safety Gym environments. The x-axes indicate the number of iterations, and the y-axes indicate the performance of the agent, including average rewards/costs/cost rates with standard deviations.

In Table 1, the *safety coefficient* is the cost threshold for the cost indicator. At each time step, if the cost indicator is larger than the *safety coefficient*, the agent will get a cost of 1, otherwise, the cost is 0. The expert trajectories are generated by solving a forward-constrained RL problem and we summarize the statistics in the table.

Baselines and Code. In order to evaluate the performance of our algorithms, we compare them against three popular IL methods without explicit cost constraints consideration (GAIL, IQ-Learn, and BC). For the constraint-aware IL method, we use LGAIL as the baseline. As noted earlier,

LGAIL assumes the knowledge of cost limit d' , which is used as a parameter in their objective function:

$$\min_{\theta} \max_{\omega, \lambda} \mathbb{E}_{\pi_{\theta}} [\log D_{\omega}(s, a)] + \mathbb{E}_{\pi_E} [\log(1 - D_{\omega}(s, a))] + \lambda (\mathbb{E}_{\pi_{\theta}} [d(s, a)] - d') - \beta H(\pi_{\theta}). \quad (16)$$

As they defined d' to be less than the minimal episode cost of expert trajectories, we use the 90% of minimal episode cost of expert trajectories as d' . In the case of BC, the expert trajectories dataset, which consists of state-action pairs, was divided into a 70% training data set and a 30% validation data set. The policy was then trained using supervised learning

Task		BC	GAIL	IQ-learn	LGAIL	CCIL	MALM	CVAG
CarGoal1	R_{pen}	0.54±0.03	-0.86± 0.34	-0.57± 0.5	-0.28±0.62	0.17±0.6	0.67± 0.08	0.61±0.06
	R_{rec}	53.91	73.57	0	72.06	76.02	67.39	61.13
	Cost-Vio	0	20.55	0	7.28	1.54	0	0
CarButton1	R_{pen}	0.35±0.45	-0.59± 0.07	0.05± 0.02	-0.36±0.47	0.13±0.53	0.01±0.52	0.42±0.08
	R_{rec}	56.84	60.73	5.49	59.29	58.19	51.94	42.48
	Cost-Vio	0.07	18.01	0	13.28	1.32	13.29	0
PointGoal1	R_{pen}	0.81±0.03	0.35± 0.78	-1.07± 0.91	0.1±0.72	0.07± 0.73	0.95±0.09	0.87±0.11
	R_{rec}	80.87	95.05	2.82	95.15	93.55	94.78	87.32
	Cost-Vio	0	7.32	20.3	8.99	9.58	0	0
PointButton1	R_{pen}	-0.19±0.53	-0.55± 0.06	-1.26± 0.21	0.37±0.54	-0.19±0.54	0.44±0.53	0.27±0.48
	R_{rec}	69.5	73.49	7.44	68.53	69.88	72.95	55.98
	Cost-Vio	5.19	15.41	19.71	3.46	5.15	0.87	1.64
DoggoGoal1	R_{pen}	-0.3 ±0.57	-0.94±0.03	0± 0.01	0.25±0.04	0.36±0.07	0.29 ± 0.09	-0.25± 0.6
	R_{rec}	27.92	44.81	0	25.32	35.5	28.79	33.33
	Cost-Vio	1.69	14.97	0	0	0	0	1.95
DoggoButton1	R_{pen}	0.35±0.05	-0.38± 0.55	-0.01±0.04	0.14±0.11	0.35±0.06	0.3± 0.05	0.06± 0.1
	R_{rec}	34.94	41.27	0	14.16	34.64	30.42	5.72
	Cost-Vio	0	11.73	0	0	0	0	0
HalfCheetah-v3	R_{pen}	-6.16±0.08	-5.91±0.05	-7.08±0.1	-0.29 ± 1.63	0.44±0.37	0.81±0.07	0.53 ± 0.26
	R_{rec}	70.61	95.19	0	51.91	44.47	81.49	52.91
	Cost-Vio	392.94	392.12	417.49	1.08	0	0	0
Hopper-v3	R_{pen}	0.16±0.02	0.48±0.61	0.07± 0.03	0.02 ±0.49	1±0.01	0.75±0.48	0.5±0.59
	R_{rec}	16.11	98.78	6.54	99.92	99.71	99.62	98.58
	Cost-Vio	0	8.59	0	7.89	0	0.62	0.8
Ant-v3	R_{pen}	-0.73±0.18	-0.69±0.02	0.15± 0.07	0.77± 0.1	0.06±0.61	0.86±0.03	0.53± 0.47
	R_{rec}	86.64	95.59	14.8	76.82	79.86	85.76	78.1
	Cost-Vio	213.94	242.25	0	0	10.64	0	4.71
Swimmer-v3	R_{pen}	-2.37±2.02	-0.17 ±0.56	0.36 ± 0.05	-0.42± 0.12	0.7 ± 0.49	0.46 ± 0.6	0.63± 0.49
	R_{rec}	58.44	94.87	35.71	93.35	94.76	94.29	87.41
	Cost-Vio	93.13	8.63	0	7.96	0.51	0.37	0.05
Walker2d-v3	R_{pen}	-0.34±0.06	-0.06±0.53	0.19±0.06	0.2±0.63	0.73±0.5	0.72±0.51	0.97±0.01
	R_{rec}	99.2	99.35	19.04	98.57	98.53	98.58	97.25
	Cost-Vio	14.02	10.22	0	7.01	1.33	2.33	0
Humanoid-v3	R_{pen}	0.32±0.01	-0.26±0.02	0.21±0.02	0.86 ± 0.02	0.95 ± 0.02	0.39±0.52	0.82± 0.03
	R_{rec}	32.21	122.94	20.6	86.01	94.83	95.77	82.4
	Cost-Vio	0	73.54	0	0	0	2.87	0

Table 2: Overall performance of different environments. Normalized penalized return R_{pen} captures the trade-off between achieving higher rewards and making the episode cost go below the expert’s episode cost, higher is better. Recovered return R_{rec} evaluates how closely the agent imitates the expert’s behavior, higher R_{rec} means the agent imitated the expert better. Cost-Vio captures the extent the agent’s episode cost goes beyond the expert’s episode cost, lower is better.

Cost type	Description	Tasks	Best methods
Hazards	Penalizing for entering dangerous areas.	PointGoal1, CarGoal1, DoggoGoal1	MALM
Hazards + Buttons	Penalizing for hazards and pressing wrong buttons	PointButton1, CarButton1, DoggoButton1	MALM
Control Cost	Penalizing for taking excessively large actions	HalfCheetah-v3, Hopper-v3	MALM, CCIL
Control + Contact Costs	Penalizing for having large actions and external contact force	Ant-v3, Humanoid-v3	MALM, CCIL
Speed Limit	Penalizing for moving at a much higher speed.	Swimmer-v3, Walker2d-v3	CVAG

Table 3: Summarizing performances based on the type of cost constraints.

techniques. Then in the GAIL method, the policy network, reward value network, cost value network, and discriminator

network all employ the same architectures, comprising two hidden layers of 100 units each, with tanh nonlinearities be-

ing utilized in the layers. Lastly, for the IQ-Learn method, we use the same setting as illustrated in Garg et al. (2021), that we use critic and actor networks with an MLP architecture with 2 hidden layers and 256 hidden units.

Implementation. We employ a neural network architecture consistent with the one utilized in the GAIL method. In addition, our approaches add a cost value network and a Lagrangian penalty term λ (in CCIL and MALM), which distinguishes our method from GAIL. The policy, value, and cost value network are optimized through gradient descent with the Adam optimizer (Kingma and Ba 2015). The initial value of λ is set to 0.01 and optimized using the Adam optimizer. In MALM, the state-action pairs of each batch size are divided into a 70% training data set and a 30% validation data set. We run each algorithm for 5 different random seeds. The algorithms ran for 2000 time steps (batch size) during each iteration, and the episode’s total true reward and cost were recorded. The details of the hyper-parameters used in the experiments can be found in the Appendix. The implementation of all code is based on the OpenAI Baselines library (Dhariwal et al. 2017), and can be found at <https://github.com/SHAOQIAN12/CCIL>.

Performance Metrics. We use different performance metrics to compare overall performance. Firstly, followed by (Ray, Achiam, and Amodei 2019), we record the average episode’s true reward, the average episode’s cost, and the cost rate over the entirety of training (the sum of all costs divided by the total number of environment interaction steps) throughout the training. We also incorporate the normalized *penalized return* introduced by (Calian et al. 2021). This metric effectively captures the delicate balance between maximizing rewards and ensuring that the episode cost remains below the expert’s episode cost. The formulation is represented as $R_{pen} = R/R_E - \mathcal{K} \max(J_d^\pi/J_d^{\pi^E} - 1, 0)$, where R and J_d^π denote the average episode true reward/cost for the algorithm upon convergence (computed as an average over the last 100 iterations), and $R_E, J_d^{\pi^E}$ represent the average episode reward/cost of the expert. The second term in the equation introduces a penalty if the episode cost exceeds the expert cost; otherwise, this term remains zero. The constant \mathcal{K} serves as a fixed parameter determining the weight assigned to the constraint violation penalty. To effectively penalize algorithms consistently breaching cost constraints during evaluation, we set $\mathcal{K} = 1.2$. The *recovered return* metric captures the degree to which the agent replicates the expert’s behavior, denoted as $R_{rec} = R/R_E \times 100$. A value of $R_{rec} \geq 100$ signifies proficient imitation of the expert, while an approach to 0 indicates the agent’s inability to replicate the expert’s behavior (with R_{rec} being 0 when returns are negative). Finally, *cost violation* is defined as $\phi_d = \max(0, J_d^\pi - J_d^{\pi^E})$. In cases where the agent’s episode cost is less than the expert’s episode cost, denoting no cost violation, ϕ_d is set to 0.

Results

Table 2 compares performance across methods using *penalized return*, *recovered return*, and *cost violation*. Figure 1

plots training dynamics¹ for most Safety Gym environments, with further details on MuJoCo environments and DoggoButton in the Appendix. We summarize our findings in Table 3, and elaborate our key observations below:

- MALM performs best on average in Safety Gym tasks. Although there is no clear winner for tasks with hazards plus button constraints, MALM demonstrates better training performances in reward and cost overall on average according to Figure 1.
- In MuJoCo environments focusing on control cost and contact cost, MALM leads for HalfCheetah and Ant, while CCIL excels in Hopper and Humanoid tasks. Especially in HalfCheetah, MALM closely approximates expert behavior, outperforming all competitors.
- CVAG performs well in constraints related to speed, ranking best for Walker2d and second for Swimmer.
- Among methods that neglect cost constraints, BC and IQ-learn have difficulty emulating expert behaviors in terms of both costs and rewards. Meanwhile, GAIL can achieve rewards close to expert levels but falls short in adhering to cost constraints, frequently incurring the highest cost rates for most scenarios.
- LGAIL comes close to expert rewards in some tasks, performance-wise it is similar to CCIL, but often incurs higher costs throughout the training process.

In summary, MALM shows the best balance between reward and cost adherence, with CVAG and CCIL next in line, outperforming baselines on reward and cost metrics.

Conclusion

In this study, we tackle the challenge of cost-constrained imitation learning with three scalable and effective methods. Our first approach is based on the Lagrangian relaxation. We then propose a meta-gradient technique that tunes Lagrangian penalties to enhance the performance. Finally, we propose an alternating gradient approach that adjusts gradients based on solution feasibility. Our experiments show these methods effectively imitate expert behaviors while meeting cost constraints, outperforming methods that ignore costs. The meta-gradient method strikes the best balance between high rewards and cost satisfaction.

Appendix

A complete version of the paper with the Appendix can be found at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2403.17456>.

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¹Including average episode true reward (R), average episode cost (J_d^π), and cost rate ($\sum_{t=1}^N d_t/N$, where N is the total number of environment interaction steps).

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