PHYS 1301

Probability

Introduction

Most of us have had the experience of listening to the weather report and hearing at one time or another the announcer say “the chance of rain tomorrow is 70%.” What does this statement mean? Intuitively, you might say that it is more likely than not that it will rain tomorrow. If we somehow managed to experience many days like today, then we would expect that more often than not it would rain the next day. This weather forecast, like all statements about chance, is a kind of guess. Our ignorance prevents us from making a firm statement about whether or not it definitely will rain the next day. The theory of probability permits us to make sensible and quantitative guesses about matters that have a consistent average behavior. To be clear about what the word “probability” really means and how you actually calculate it, consider the case where you throw two dice, one green and one red. Each die face can show any integer in the range from 1 to 6 and you are interested in the sum of the two die faces. You want to know what the “probability” of rolling a total of 5 is because if you can reliably determine this probability you will win much money. The outcome – the sum of the die faces - can be any integer between 2 and 12. In our example, there are a number of different ways that a total of 5 can be rolled. Call this set of different ways A and we have

$$A = \{(1,4), (2,3), (3,2), (4,1)\},$$

where the first number in each ordered pair is the number the red die shows and the second number is the number the green die shows. Each ordered pair of numbers is called an outcome and each roll of the die pair is called an “experiment.” You should be able to convince yourself that there are a total of 36 possible outcomes when rolling the dice. The red die can show any integer from 1 to 6 and since for each of these numbers the green die can show any number from 1 to 6, 6 X 6 makes 36. Useful jargon is that the set of all possible outcomes in an experiment is called the “sample space.” For our experiment of rolling two dice at a time, the sample space is the set of 36 possible outcomes or ordered pairs of numbers. Do not confuse the sample space with the total number of times you happen to roll the dice, which could be 65 times or 500,000 times. What does this have to do with calculating the probability of rolling a 5? Well, by “probability” of a particular outcome of an experiment, we mean our estimate of the most likely fraction of a number of repeated observations that will yield that particular outcome. And do how do you calculate this probability? If you think that each outcome is equally likely, you simply sum up the number of outcomes that will yield a particular event and then divide by the size of the sample space. In our example, there are 4 possible outcomes that produce the “event” of rolling a total of 5 and there are 36 total possible outcomes in our sample space, so the probability of rolling a 5 is 4/36 = 1/9.

There are subtleties you should be aware of. To assign a probability to some outcome, it is necessary that the experiment be capable of being repeated**.** For example, it is far from clear that the statement, “the probability that Jack Ruby murdered John Kennedy is 85%”, has any meaning at all. How do we arrange to run many “experiments” with the participation of the deceased? Is the deceased supposed to be repeatedly resurrected after the murder so that the experiments can continue? Secondly, as more information becomes available to us, our probability estimate for a particular outcome in the experiment can change. Suppose the experiment is that your sister draws a card from a standard deck and then asks you the probability that it is a queen. If you find out somehow that your sister nervously twitches her ears when she draws either aces or queens, then your answer will certainly depend on the motion of her ears. Having the extra information doesn't change the experiment in any way (your sister twitches her ears whether you know it or not), it does however change your knowledge of the experiment.

When we are playing with our dice, we do not necessarily expect that if we roll the dice 45 times we will observe that exactly 1/9 of the time the sum of the die faces will be 5, even if the dice are honest. This does not mean that our notions of probability are useless. It does mean that to make a probabilistic statement implies that we have a certain amount of ignorance of the experimental situation. If we somehow knew everything, we could say exactly what the dice were going to do. However, we can say that if we keep rolling the dice, we do expect that the fraction of times the die face sum to 5 will come closer and closer to 1/9.

So, how many times do we have to roll the dice before we are confident that our probability calculation is really correct? The answer is there is no specific number of times we need to roll the dice that will definitely tell us one way or the other that our probability calculation is absolutely correct! The reason is that there is some chance, no matter how small, that the dice after many throws happen to come up summing to 5 at a rate different from 1/9. (For example, if you threw the dice 99,000 times, it is certainly possible that the number of times the dice summed to 5 could be different from 11,000 even if there is no cheating.) The important point here is that we expect that the more often we roll the dice, the more likely the summed results approach our probabilistic predictions. Differences between the actual results of our experiments and our probabilistic predictions are called "statistical fluctuations." If our probabilistic predictions are sensible, then we expect the statistical fluctuations to become smaller as the number of times we perform the experiment becomes larger, i.e., the larger the "statistics" we collect.

To summarize, we want to check two important ideas about probability. First, we want to check the idea that the probability for an experiment can be estimated by counting outcomes of actual experiments. Secondly, we would like to verify that as the number of experiments increases, the statistical fluctuations decrease. If our ideas of probability are sensible, then we expect that our theoretical calculation of the fraction of time a particular sum shows should more closely match the actual observations as we perform more and more experiments.

Equipment: jar and 1 pair dice.

Procedure:

Each of you will perform your own experiments with your own jar. A “roll” of the dice just means you briefly shake the jar. You are interested in the sum of the numbers showing on your dice.

1. Fill out the second row in table 1 by adding up the number of different possible outcomes. Show your working and just enter the final result in the table.

2. Complete table 1. For the 3rd row, keep your answers in fractional form #/36. Check they add up to 1.

3. Now you will perform many rolls by shaking the jar and observing the dice sum after each roll. Each person should perform 36 rolls of their dice (36 is an arbitrary choice but makes the comparison to theory easier). Tally how often you get the sums 2 – 12 and then record the results in row 2 of table 2 (“observed number of events”). Fill out row 3 of table 2 (“relative fraction of observed events”); keep your answers in fractional form #/36. Check they add up to 1.

4. Move on to table 3, “Class Rolls.” Give your results for each event (a particular sum) to the instructor, who will enter into a spreadsheet and display results from the whole class. Fill out rows 2 and 3 for each event from everyone in the lab. To keep 36 as the denominator and make comparison easier, the spreadsheet will display numerators that are not whole numbers. What is the formula being used by the spreadsheet to calculate these numerators?

5.

On one graph, plot the sum numbers 2 -12 on the horizontal axis and the fraction of events on the vertical axis for results from tables 1, 2, and 3. Using a different line style for results from each table, join up the points from each table with lines.

Conclusions

Using the graph to help you, compare the fractions in each box in the last row of each table .

Describe the similarities
Describe the differences

Describe whether the agreement between the box pairs of table 1 and table 2 is better or worse than the agreement between box pairs of table 1 and table 3.

Results

Table 1. Theory

Sum	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Number of outcomes											
Probability											

Table 2. Private Rolls.

Sum	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Observed number of events											
Observed relative Fraction of events											

Table 3. Class Rolls.

Sum	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Observed number of events											
Observed relative Fraction of events											