

# Learning Acrobatic Flight from Preferences

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**Abstract**—Preference-based reinforcement learning (PbRL) enables agents to learn control policies without requiring manually designed reward functions, making it well-suited for tasks where objectives are difficult to formalize or inherently subjective. Acrobatic flight poses a particularly challenging problem due to its complex dynamics, rapid movements, and the importance of precise execution. However, manually designed reward functions for such tasks often fail to capture the qualities that matter: we find that hand-crafted rewards agree with human judgment only 60.7% of the time, underscoring the need for preference-driven approaches. In this work, we propose Reward Ensemble under Confidence (REC), a probabilistic reward learning framework for PbRL that explicitly models per-timestep reward uncertainty through an ensemble of distributional reward models. By propagating uncertainty into the preference loss and leveraging disagreement for exploration, REC achieves 88.4% of shaped reward performance on acrobatic quadrotor control, compared to 55.2% with standard Preference PPO. We train policies in simulation and successfully transfer them zero-shot to the real world, demonstrating complex acrobatic maneuvers learned purely from preference feedback. We further validate REC on a continuous control benchmark, confirming its applicability beyond the domain of aerial robotics.

**Index Terms**—Aerial Systems: Perception and Autonomy, Machine Learning for Robot Control, Reinforcement Learning

## I. INTRODUCTION

Autonomous drones capable of executing dynamic and agile maneuvers have become a benchmark for progress in robotics, with applications ranging from high-speed navigation [1] and search-and-rescue to inspection [2]. Reinforcement learning (RL) has shown promise in enabling such high-performance control policies, even surpassing expert human pilots in competitive environments [1]. However, a persistent challenge in applying RL to real-world tasks is the design of effective reward functions.

Reward design is not only time-consuming and task-specific, but it also introduces a fundamental bottleneck: many tasks—particularly those involving aesthetics, subjective quality, or high-level intent—are difficult or even impossible to express with a well-defined reward function. This limitation is especially critical in acrobatic flight maneuvers, where desirable behavior may depend on human preferences over trajectory smoothness, timing, or style.

Acrobatic flight compounds this difficulty due to its highly nonlinear dynamics, rapid state transitions, and narrow margins for error. Small differences in execution can distinguish a smooth, visually compelling maneuver from a jerky or failed one, yet formalizing such distinctions in a reward function

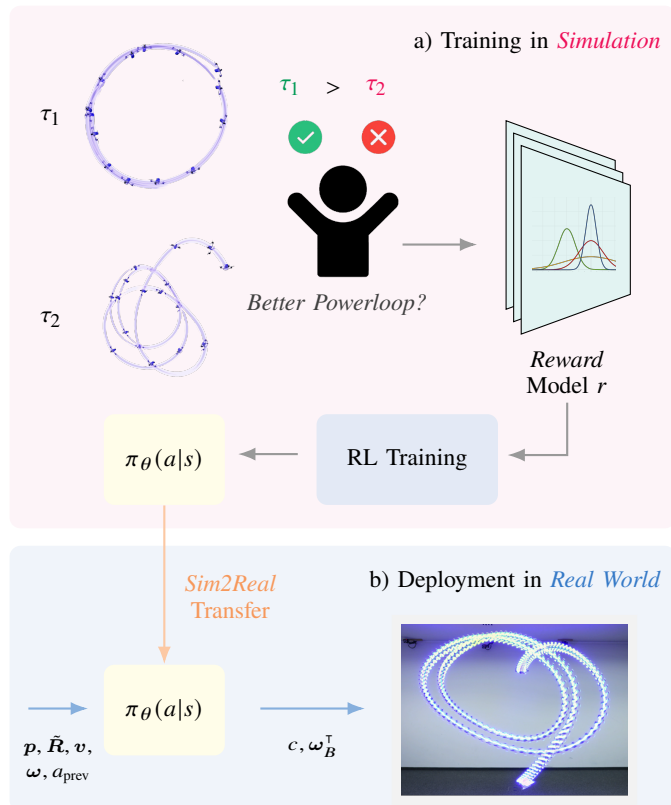


Fig. 1. Overview of the proposed approach. (a) In simulation, trajectory pairs  $(\tau_1, \tau_2)$  are presented to an annotator (human or synthetic) to collect preference labels. These labels train an ensemble of reward models with uncertainty estimation, which provides the reward signal for policy optimization via reinforcement learning. (b) The resulting policy is transferred zero-shot to a real quadrotor to execute acrobatic maneuvers.

requires extensive domain expertise and iterative tuning. Even carefully engineered rewards may fail to reflect what observers actually prefer: as we show in this work, hand-crafted rewards agree with human judgment only 60.7% of the time.

To address this, preference-based reinforcement learning (PbRL) has emerged as a compelling alternative. Rather than specifying explicit rewards, PbRL infers a reward function from comparisons between trajectory segments [3]. This approach enables policy learning for tasks that are hard to define but easy to evaluate by preference. Each acrobatic skill would typically require its own carefully designed reward function in traditional RL, whereas PbRL offers a more general framework that can adapt across different maneuvers without task-specific reward engineering. Unlike imitation learning, which requires high-quality demonstrations, PbRL only requires comparative judgments between behaviors, decoupling the quality of the learned policy from the skill level of the feedback source.

Despite the promise of PbRL, its application in real-world robotics has been limited. Most prior work has focused on simulated benchmarks, and applications to physical systems,

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particularly agile drones, remain scarce. Existing methods also tend to overlook the uncertainty inherent in preferences, which can lead to instability or suboptimal learning when feedback is noisy or sparse. Without accounting for this uncertainty, reward models can overfit to ambiguous preference labels, leading to brittle policies that may fail to deploy.

In this work, we propose *Reward Ensemble under Confidence* (REC), a probabilistic preference-based reinforcement learning framework for acrobatic drone flight. REC introduces an ensemble of distributional reward models that explicitly capture per-timestep reward uncertainty and propagate it through the preference loss via a Gaussian cumulative distribution function.

The key insight behind REC is that preference feedback is inherently probabilistic: when two trajectories are similar in quality, the preferred choice is noisy and uncertain. Rather than treating preferences as deterministic labels, REC models each per-timestep reward as a distribution, allowing the framework to naturally express confidence in its predictions. This uncertainty is further leveraged through ensemble disagreement to encourage exploration in reward regions where the model is least certain, resulting in more stable training and stronger policy performance under limited preference supervision.

We validate our approach through simulation and real-world experiments on acrobatic quadrotor control, as well as on a standard continuous control benchmark. Our contributions are as follows:

- 1) We propose REC, a probabilistic reward learning framework that models per-timestep reward uncertainty within an ensemble of reward models, replacing the standard Bradley-Terry softmax with a distributional preference model.
- 2) We demonstrate that REC achieves 88.4% of shaped reward performance on acrobatic quadrotor control, compared to 55.2% with standard Preference PPO, representing a substantial improvement in preference-based learning for agile flight.
- 3) We successfully transfer learned policies zero-shot to a real 220 g quadrotor, executing acrobatic maneuvers including continuous powerloops and a novel vertical Figure-8 learned purely from preference feedback.
- 4) We show that hand-crafted reward functions agree with human judgment only 60.7% of the time, highlighting the limitations of manual reward engineering for tasks with subjective objectives.

## II. RELATED WORKS

**Preference-Based Reinforcement Learning.** Preference-based reinforcement learning (PbRL) enables agents to learn policies directly from comparisons between trajectory segments, typically provided by human evaluators, bypassing the need for manually designed reward functions. This approach was introduced by [3] and has since inspired numerous advances. Furthermore, limitations in time and sample efficiency have been mitigated through approaches that actively generate pairwise comparisons guided by information gain [4], by selecting batches of comparison pairs [5], and active volume

removal [6]. Recent efforts include enhancing exploration efficiency through unsupervised pretraining [7], incorporating transformer-based reward models to capture temporal and non-Markovian aspects of human feedback [8], and exploring implicit reward learning via Q-functions without explicitly modeled rewards [9]. Similarly, [10] leverage reward uncertainty from ensemble disagreement to drive exploration in preference-based learning.

**Real-World Deployments of PbRL.** Despite its success in simulation, PbRL has seen limited application in real-world robotics, though recent studies show growing interest. One line of research improves sample efficiency by leveraging pre-trained preference models from prior tasks, enabling adaptation to novel tasks on robotic manipulators [11], or using priors obtained from pre-trained LLMs for higher quality candidates in PbRL to achieve expressive behaviors on a quadraped [12]. Another approach combines demonstrations with preference queries to address the inefficiencies of standard PbRL and the limitations of inverse reinforcement learning [13].

**Reinforcement Learning in Quadrotor Control.** Reinforcement learning has significantly advanced quadrotor control capabilities, with remarkable successes in drone racing [1], [14], robust maneuvering under disturbances [15], and agile flight tasks [16], [17]. Recent works have further demonstrated vision-based RL without using any state information [18], [19]. However, most of these methods rely on manually engineered reward functions. To the best of our knowledge, PbRL has not been applied to quadrotor acrobatics. Our work addresses this gap, demonstrating both simulation efficacy and real-world feasibility using preference feedback from both synthetic and human sources.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Preliminaries

We consider a traditional RL setting in which an agent interacts with an environment. The agent receives an observation  $o_t$  from the environment, while taking an action  $a_t$  in the environment. For each observation-action pair  $(o_t, a_t)$ , the agent receives a reward  $r_t = r(o_t, a_t)$ . In traditional RL, this reward is provided by a hand-crafted set of rules. In PbRL, we use no hand-crafted rewards but a learned reward model instead, which is trained using preference labels obtained from ranking pairs of trajectories. In Online PbRL, these preference labels are collected by repeatedly presenting pairs of trajectories to an annotator, who selects the preferred one. This labeling process alternates with policy optimization to iteratively improve the agent’s behavior.

**Trajectory.** We denote a trajectory  $\tau$  as a sequence of observation–action pairs  $(o_i, a_i)$  of length  $N$ :

$$\tau = ((o_1, a_1), (o_2, a_2), \dots, (o_N, a_N)), \quad (1)$$

where  $o_i$  is the observation at timestep  $i$  and  $a_i$  the corresponding action. The total reward of a trajectory  $r(\tau)$  is the sum of the rewards at each timestep:

$$r(\tau) = \sum_{i=1}^N r_i. \quad (2)$$

The reinforcement learning objective can be formalized as maximizing the expected sum of discounted rewards:

$$\max_{\pi} \mathbb{E}_{\tau \sim \pi} [r(\tau)] = \max_{\pi} \mathbb{E}_{\tau \sim \pi} \left[ \sum_{i=1}^N \gamma^i r_i \right], \quad (3)$$

where  $\pi$  denotes the policy,  $\tau \sim \pi$  represents trajectories sampled from the policy, and  $\gamma \in [0, 1]$  is the discount factor.

### B. Quadrotor System Model

We consider the problem of learning acrobatic flight policies for a quadrotor platform. We use Flightmare [20] and Agilicious [21] for training in simulation and deploying in the real world. The quadrotor dynamics are modeled as

$$\dot{\mathbf{x}} = \begin{bmatrix} \dot{\mathbf{p}}_{\mathcal{WB}} \\ \dot{\mathbf{q}}_{\mathcal{WB}} \\ \dot{\mathbf{v}}_{\mathcal{W}} \\ \dot{\boldsymbol{\omega}}_{\mathcal{B}} \\ \dot{\boldsymbol{\Omega}} \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{v}_{\mathcal{W}} \\ \mathbf{q}_{\mathcal{WB}} \cdot \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ \boldsymbol{\omega}_{\mathcal{B}}/2 \end{bmatrix} \\ \frac{1}{m} (\mathbf{q}_{\mathcal{WB}} \odot (\mathbf{f}_{\text{prop}} + \mathbf{f}_{\text{aero}})) + \mathbf{g}_{\mathcal{W}} \\ \mathbf{J}^{-1} (\boldsymbol{\tau}_{\text{prop}} + \boldsymbol{\tau}_{\text{aero}} - \boldsymbol{\omega}_{\mathcal{B}} \times \mathbf{J} \boldsymbol{\omega}_{\mathcal{B}}) \\ \frac{1}{k_{\text{mot}}} (\boldsymbol{\Omega}_{\text{ss}} - \boldsymbol{\Omega}) \end{bmatrix},$$

where  $\odot$  denotes quaternion-based rotation,  $\mathbf{p}_{\mathcal{WB}}$ ,  $\mathbf{q}_{\mathcal{WB}}$ ,  $\mathbf{v}_{\mathcal{W}}$ , and  $\boldsymbol{\omega}_{\mathcal{B}}$  are the vehicle's position, orientation, velocity, and angular rates,  $\mathbf{J}$  is the inertia tensor,  $k_{\text{mot}}$  the motor time constant, and  $\boldsymbol{\Omega}$ ,  $\boldsymbol{\Omega}_{\text{ss}}$  the current and commanded rotor speeds. Propulsion and aerodynamic effects are captured by  $\mathbf{f}_{\text{prop}}$ ,  $\boldsymbol{\tau}_{\text{prop}}$  and  $\mathbf{f}_{\text{aero}}$ ,  $\boldsymbol{\tau}_{\text{aero}}$ . We employ a quadratic thrust model with data-driven corrections following [1]; see [22] for further details.

The policy observation at time  $t$  consists of position  $\mathbf{p}_t \in \mathbb{R}^3$ , linear velocity  $\mathbf{v}_t \in \mathbb{R}^3$ , the first two columns of the rotation matrix  $R_t \in \mathbb{R}^6$ , angular velocity  $\boldsymbol{\omega}_t \in \mathbb{R}^3$ , and the previous action  $\mathbf{a}_{t-1} \in \mathbb{R}^4$ . The action space consists of collective thrust and body rates (CTBR),  $\mathbf{a}_t \in \mathbb{R}^4$ . The shaped reward used for the PPO baseline and synthetic preference generation is described in Appendix V-A.

### C. Preference-based Reinforcement Learning

To formalize preference-based reinforcement learning, we first define the concepts of *Preference* and *Preference Modeling*, *Cross Entropy Loss*, and *Synthetic Preference Generation*.

**Preference.** A preference label  $p \in [0, 1]$  is assigned by a *judge* to a pair of trajectories, reflecting the relative preference between them. We assume that preferences are determined by an underlying reward function  $r : \tau \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ , where

$$p(\tau_1, \tau_2) = \begin{cases} 0, & \text{if } r(\tau_1) > r(\tau_2), \\ 0.5 & \text{if } r(\tau_1) = r(\tau_2), \\ 1, & \text{if } r(\tau_1) < r(\tau_2). \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

**Preference Modeling.** A commonly used model of preference judgment, as is also being done in [3], is viewing the reward  $r$  of a trajectory  $\tau$  as a latent variable that determines the choices of the annotator. More precisely, the probability of preferring one trajectory over the other is given by the softmax of the two rewards,

$$\hat{p}(\tau_1 > \tau_2) = \frac{\exp(\hat{r}_1)}{\exp(\hat{r}_1) + \exp(\hat{r}_2)}, \quad (5)$$

which is known as the Bradley–Terry (BT) model. In our notation, we refer to a predicted variable by  $\hat{x}$ , whereas ground truth variables are referred to as  $x$ .

**Cross Entropy Loss.** In Preference PPO [23], the reward model  $\hat{r}$  is optimized by minimizing the cross entropy loss between the BT model predictions and the true labels, using the following loss:

$$\text{loss}(\hat{r}) = - \sum_{(\tau_1^i, \tau_2^i, p^i) \in D} \left[ p^i \cdot \log(\hat{p}(\tau_1^i > \tau_2^i)) + (1 - p^i) \cdot \log(\hat{p}(\tau_2^i > \tau_1^i)) \right]. \quad (6)$$

**Synthetic Preference Generation.** To assess the performance of our preference-based RL method, we use synthetic preferences, which serve as an oracle representing preferences based on the total handcrafted reward of each compared trajectory in the training environment [3]. The preferred trajectory is the one that achieves a higher reward in the given task. The detailed reward functions of each environment are described in Appendix V-A.

1) *Unsupervised Pretraining:* As presented in [7] the pre-training step is used to improve the initial exploration of the policy. In preference-based learning, this is especially useful, as there is no guidance for the policy before the reward model has been trained. To train the reward model, some labeled trajectories are necessary. To encourage exploration, an intrinsic reward is given based on the state entropy  $H(s) = \mathbb{E}_{s \sim \rho(s)} [\log(\rho(s))]$ . As this is intractable, a particle-based entropy estimator [24] is used:

$$\hat{H}(s) \sim \sum_i \log(\|s_i - s_i^k\|). \quad (7)$$

Finally, the intrinsic reward for unsupervised exploration  $r^{\text{int}}$  is given by the distance to the  $k$ -th nearest neighbor of the current state  $s_t$ :

$$r^{\text{int}}(s_t) = \log(\|s_t - s_t^k\|). \quad (8)$$

2) *Query and Reward Training Scheduling:* The process of collecting new preferences, also known as querying, and retraining the reward predictor follows the same schedule: the reward model is retrained every time new preferences are gathered.

These schedules are specified in terms of  $n_{\text{steps}}$ , which represents the number of time-step interactions between the reinforcement learning agent and the environment. We define an epoch as the interval between two consecutive instances of preference collection and reward model retraining. Consequently, the epoch counter increments each time the reward model is updated. The hyperparameters for the preference-based methods are listed in Table B2 in Appendix V-B.

3) *Query Selection:* We select and pair trajectories for preference comparisons using three distinct heuristics. Each method contributes one-third of the total pairs, and each trajectory is used at most once.

a) *Random:* Pairs are selected at random. This serves as the default during the initial pairing phase before the reward model has been trained.

b) *Ensemble Disagreement*: All possible pairs are generated from the available trajectories, and each pair receives a preference label from every ensemble member. Pairs are then sorted in descending order by the number of ensemble members that disagree, and the highest-disagreement pairs are selected such that no trajectory is repeated.

c) *Current with Previous Epoch*: Here, an epoch refers to the interval between two reward retraining phases. A trajectory generated after the most recent reward update is paired with one generated before it.

#### D. REC Preference PPO

In this section, we introduce REC, a probabilistic reward learning framework that explicitly models uncertainty in the predicted reward. REC consists of three components: a probabilistic loss function for the reward model, an uncertainty-aware reward aggregation strategy, and an ensemble resetting mechanism.

##### 1) Loss Function:

a) *Probabilistic Cross Entropy Loss.*: For the reward model, we use an ensemble of  $n_{\text{ensemble}}$  (denoted  $n$  for brevity) multi-layer perceptrons. Each ensemble member takes the current observation-action pair  $(o_t, a_t)$  as input and outputs a scalar reward prediction  $r_{t,\text{pred}}^i$ . The distributional reward parameters are obtained from the ensemble statistics:

$$r_{\text{mean}}(o_t, a_t) = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n r_{t,\text{pred}}^i, \quad r_{\text{std}}(o_t, a_t) = \text{std} \left( \{r_{t,\text{pred}}^i\}_{i=1}^n \right). \quad (9)$$

We model the reward at each timestep as a sample from a normal distribution parameterized by these ensemble statistics:

$$r(o_t, a_t) \sim \mathcal{N}(r_{\text{mean}}(o_t, a_t), r_{\text{std}}(o_t, a_t)). \quad (10)$$

The reward for the whole trajectory is then given by

$$r(\tau) \sim \sum_t \mathcal{N}(r_{\text{mean}}(o_t, a_t), r_{\text{std}}(o_t, a_t)). \quad (11)$$

Assuming independence across timesteps, we can rewrite this as:

$$\begin{aligned} r(\tau) &\sim \mathcal{N} \left( \sum_t r_{\text{mean}}(o_t, a_t), \sqrt{\sum_t r_{\text{std}}(o_t, a_t)^2} \right) \\ &= \mathcal{N} \left( r_{\text{mean}}(\tau), r_{\text{std}}(\tau) \right). \end{aligned} \quad (12)$$

Given the distribution for the trajectory reward  $r(\tau)$ , we can model the preference between two trajectories. Here,  $\Phi$  denotes the cumulative distribution function (CDF) of the standard normal, which gives the probability that a sample from  $r(\tau_1)$  is larger than one from  $r(\tau_2)$ :

$$p(\tau_1 > \tau_2) = \Phi \left( \frac{r_{\text{mean}}(\tau_1) - r_{\text{mean}}(\tau_2)}{\sqrt{r_{\text{std}}(\tau_1)^2 + r_{\text{std}}(\tau_2)^2}} \right). \quad (13)$$

Note that this replaces the Bradley-Terry softmax in Eq. 6 with a Gaussian CDF preference model that naturally incorporates reward uncertainty. When ensemble members agree and the standard deviations approach zero, this formulation recovers

the deterministic preference model. We derive the preference loss by minimizing the cross-entropy with respect to this probabilistic preference:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{loss}(\hat{r}) = & - \sum_{(\tau_1^i, \tau_2^i, p^i) \in D} \left[ p^i \log \hat{p}(\tau_1^i > \tau_2^i) \right. \\ & \left. + (1 - p^i) \log (1 - \hat{p}(\tau_1^i > \tau_2^i)) \right]. \end{aligned} \quad (14)$$

b) *Standard Deviation Target Loss.*: To encourage more stable standard deviation estimates across ensemble members, we introduce an additional loss term. This term penalizes the squared error between a target standard deviation  $\sigma_{\text{target}}$  and the mean standard deviation across all timesteps in the preference dataset,  $\bar{\sigma}$ :

$$\text{loss}_{\sigma} = (\bar{\sigma} - \sigma_{\text{target}})^2. \quad (15)$$

Without this regularization, ensemble members can collapse to identical predictions with near-zero standard deviation, effectively recovering the deterministic Bradley-Terry model and negating the benefits of probabilistic modeling.

2) *Reward Aggregation*: To provide the reward signal for policy optimization, we aggregate the ensemble predictions using a noisy aggregation method that increases the reward in regions of high uncertainty, following the approach of [10]:

$$r_{t,\text{pred}}^{\text{agg}} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n r_{t,\text{pred}}^i + |X|, \quad (16)$$

where  $X$  is drawn from:

$$X \sim \mathcal{N} \left( 0, \sqrt{\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \left( r_{t,\text{pred}}^i - \frac{1}{n} \sum_{j=1}^n r_{t,\text{pred}}^j \right)^2} \right). \quad (17)$$

The absolute value ensures that ensemble disagreement always results in a positive reward bonus, encouraging the policy to visit states where the reward model is uncertain. This drives exploration toward regions where additional preference feedback would be most informative.

3) *Ensemble Resetting*: Before each reward model retraining, we evaluate each ensemble member separately on the newly added preferences. We then re-initialize the weights of the worst-performing  $n_{\text{reset}} \in [0, \dots, n_{\text{ensemble}}]$  ensemble members. This prevents poorly performing members from corrupting the ensemble statistics and helps maintain diversity among the ensemble, which is essential for meaningful uncertainty estimates. Without resetting, ensemble members can converge to similar predictions over time, reducing the effectiveness of both the probabilistic loss and the uncertainty-driven exploration. Unless otherwise specified, we use  $n_{\text{reset}} = 1$  in our experiments.

## IV. RESULTS

### A. DM Control Evaluation

To validate REC beyond aerial robotics, we evaluate on the *walker-walk* task from the DM Control Suite [25], using the implementation of Tai et al. [26]. We ablate each component of REC with respect to Preference PPO across 3 seeds, using

the same hyperparameters as in [23]. Fig. 2 shows the mean episode reward during training, and Table I reports the best evaluation reward per method. Each component improves over the Preference PPO baseline, with the probabilistic loss and reward noise yielding the largest gains. Ensemble resetting slightly reduces mean reward on this task but decreases variance from  $\pm 55.5$  to  $\pm 43.3$ , indicating more consistent training. Its benefit is more pronounced on the quadrotor task (Table II), where maintaining ensemble diversity has greater impact.

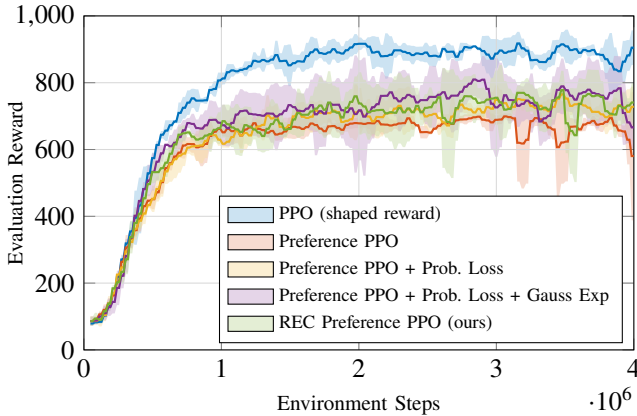


Fig. 2. Average reward on the *walker-walk* task with 1000 synthetic preferences while training. Shaded areas denote standard deviation across 3 seeds. PPO with the shaped environment reward serves as the upper baseline. Ablation components are introduced incrementally to obtain REC Preference PPO.

TABLE I

Maximum evaluation reward during training on the *walker-walk* task. Values represent the highest mean evaluation reward across three seeds ( $\pm$  standard deviation). Components of REC are incrementally introduced starting from the Preference PPO baseline.

Method	Max. Eval. Rew.
PPO	$930.7 \pm 12.0$
Preference PPO	$719.0 \pm 9.3$
Preference PPO	$777.5 \pm 66.2$
+ Prob. Rew. Loss	
Preference PPO	$829.4 \pm 55.5$
+ Prob. Rew. Loss	
+ Rew. Noise	
Preference PPO	$815.1 \pm 43.3$
+ Prob. Rew. Loss	
+ Rew. Noise	
+ Reset Ensemble — (REC)	

### B. Evaluation on the Quadrotor

We evaluate four training configurations in the Flightmare [20] simulator: PPO with the shaped reward, Preference PPO, and REC Preference PPO with both synthetic and human preferences. Stop-motion visualizations of the best rollouts are shown in Fig. 3, and Table II reports the mean best evaluation reward across three seeds. Fig. 5 shows the evaluation reward over training for the continuous powerloop task using 1000 synthetic preferences. REC Preference PPO achieves a mean evaluation reward of  $382.4 \pm 80.8$ , corresponding to 88.4% of the shaped reward baseline ( $432.4 \pm 190.8$ ), compared to

$238.9 \pm 157.5$  (55.2%) for standard Preference PPO. Notably, REC also exhibits substantially lower variance across seeds, indicating more reliable convergence on this challenging exploration problem.

TABLE II

Maximum evaluation reward during training of the continuous powerloop task. Values represent the highest mean evaluation reward across three seeds ( $\pm$  standard deviation). Components of REC are incrementally introduced starting from the Preference PPO baseline.

Method	Max. Eval. Rew.
PPO (shaped reward)	$432.4 \pm 190.8$
Preference PPO	$238.9 \pm 157.5$
Preference PPO	$281.0 \pm 187.4$
+ Prob. Rew. Loss	
Preference PPO	$153.9 \pm 174.2$
+ Prob. Rew. Loss	
+ Reward Noise	
Preference PPO	$382.4 \pm 80.8$
+ Prob. Rew. Loss	
+ Rew. Noise	
+ Reset Ensemble — (REC)	

### C. Preference Feedback from a Human Annotator

We evaluate REC Preference PPO using preference labels provided by a human annotator. The experimental settings are identical to the synthetic preference experiments, with the annotator comparing trajectory pairs rendered from the simulator. The annotator has the additional option of responding ‘*I can’t tell*’, in which case the pair is discarded and replaced. Of the 1064 comparisons shown, 1000 valid preference labels were collected. The complete training and labeling process took 4 h 43 min. Since no ground-truth reward is assumed to be available in this setting, the policy checkpoint for evaluation and deployment is selected by the annotator rather than by maximum evaluation reward.

Table III shows the agreement between the annotator’s preferences and those implied by the shaped reward function. Excluding ties, the two agree only 60.7% of the time. Rather than indicating poor annotation quality, this low agreement highlights the limitations of the shaped reward in capturing the qualities that an observer considers important when evaluating acrobatic maneuvers. Despite this misalignment, the policy trained from human preferences successfully executes the powerloop maneuver both in simulation and on the real platform (Section IV-D), suggesting that preference feedback captures task-relevant information that the shaped reward does not fully encode. Extending the annotation process to multiple evaluators and analyzing inter-annotator agreement would provide further insight into the consistency and robustness of preference signals for acrobatic tasks.

TABLE III

Agreement between the shaped reward function and the human annotator. Rows indicate the shaped reward’s preference, columns the human’s choice. The shaped reward never produces ties by construction. Excluding human tie responses, the two sources agree in 60.7% of cases.

	Human: $\tau_1$	Human: $\tau_2$	Human: tie
Reward: $\tau_1$	323	167	37
Reward: $\tau_2$	196	238	39

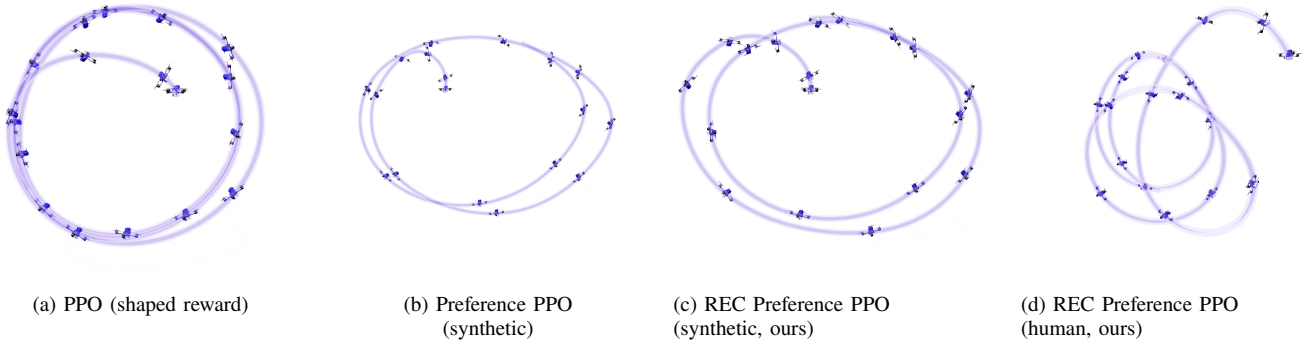


Fig. 3. Stop-motion visualizations of the highest-reward evaluation rollout in simulation for each training configuration. (a) PPO with shaped rewards. (b) Preference PPO with 1000 synthetic preferences. (c) REC Preference PPO with 1000 synthetic preferences. (d) REC Preference PPO with 1000 human-labeled preferences.

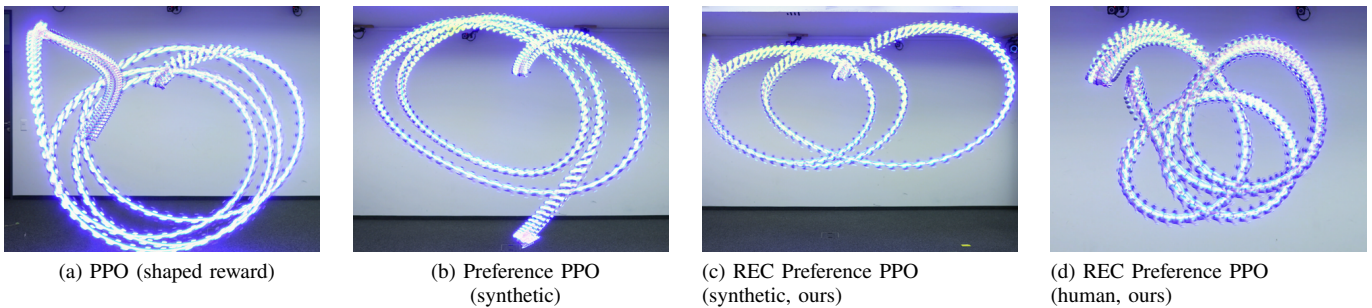


Fig. 4. Long-exposure photographs of real-world deployment across four training configurations. (a) PPO with shaped rewards. (b) Preference PPO with 1000 synthetic preferences. (c) REC Preference PPO with 1000 synthetic preferences. (d) REC Preference PPO with 1000 human-labeled preferences on the powerloop task.

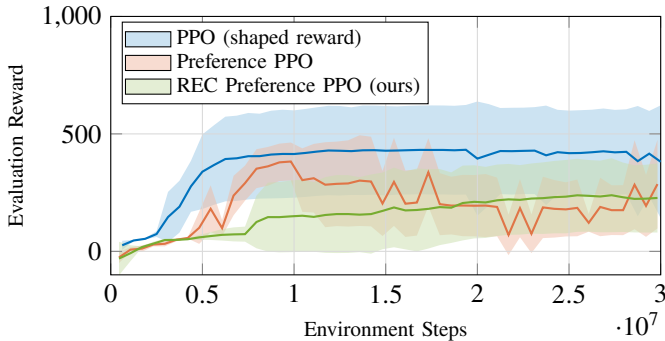


Fig. 5. Mean evaluation reward over 3 seeds during training of the continuous powerloop with 1000 synthetic preferences. Shaded areas indicate standard deviation.

#### D. Real-World Deployment and Novel Acrobatic Skills

We deploy the simulation-trained policies on a 220 g quadrotor, commanding collective thrust and body rates (CTBR) at 50 Hz. For configurations trained with synthetic preferences, we select the checkpoint with the highest evaluation reward. For the human preference experiment, the annotator selects the checkpoint. All policies are transferred zero-shot without any real-world fine-tuning. Deployment results for each training configuration are shown in Fig. 4. All four configurations successfully execute continuous powerloop maneuvers

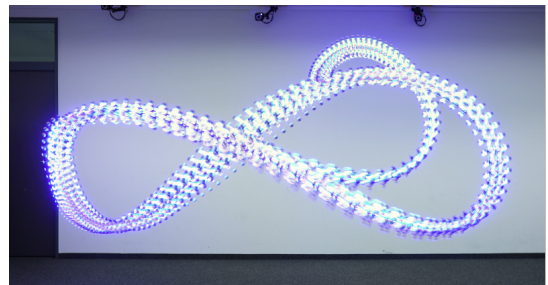


Fig. 6. Vertical Figure-8 (double powerloop) trained purely from human preference feedback using REC Preference PPO without any handcrafted reward function.

on the real platform, demonstrating that both the synthetic and human preference signals provide sufficient information for sim-to-real transfer of agile flight policies. Furthermore, to demonstrate the generality of the preference-based framework, we train a policy for a novel vertical Figure-8 (double powerloop) maneuver using only human preference feedback, without modifying any hyperparameters. The resulting policy, shown in Fig. 6, successfully executes this maneuver on the real drone, illustrating how preference feedback enables non-expert users to specify new acrobatic skills without reward engineering.

## E. Discussion

The probabilistic approach of REC yields a meaningful improvement over standard Preference PPO on the quadrotor powerloop task, achieving 88.4% of shaped reward performance compared to 55.2%, while also reducing variance across seeds. The ablation results on both walker-walk and the quadrotor task indicate that the probabilistic loss and reward noise contribute the largest individual gains, while ensemble resetting primarily improves consistency. On walker-walk, where the exploration landscape is less challenging, resetting has a modest effect. On the quadrotor task, where agents frequently fail to explore beyond an initial half-flip, maintaining ensemble diversity through resetting proves more impactful, suggesting that its benefit scales with task difficulty.

The 60.7% agreement between the shaped reward and human preferences warrants careful interpretation. This misalignment does not indicate poor annotation quality but rather reflects a fundamental limitation of manual reward engineering for tasks with subjective objectives. Human observers evaluate acrobatic maneuvers holistically, considering qualities such as smoothness, timing, and visual impression that are difficult to decompose into Markovian reward terms. Notably, despite this low agreement, the human-trained policy successfully transfers to the real platform, indicating that the preference signal captures task-relevant structure that the shaped reward does not fully encode. However, human evaluation of acrobatic flight introduces its own challenges. Annotators can assess geometric trajectory properties such as shape and smoothness but cannot directly perceive control-level quantities such as angular velocities, thrust commands, or energy consumption. This observability gap may lead to policies that are visually compelling but suboptimal from a control-theoretic perspective. Similarly, the evaluation is inherently viewpoint-dependent: the perceived quality of a maneuver varies with camera angle and rendering choices, which may introduce systematic bias into the preference signal. Addressing these limitations through multi-perspective evaluation or augmenting visual feedback with control-level metrics represents a promising direction for future work.

Finally, the high variance observed across training seeds reflects the inherent exploration difficulty of acrobatic tasks, where agents must discover full rotational maneuvers from limited initial behaviors. This challenge is not unique to preference-based methods but is exacerbated by the absence of a shaped reward to guide early exploration. Incorporating curriculum learning or more targeted exploration strategies could mitigate this issue and improve the reliability of training across seeds.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this work, we propose REC, a probabilistic reward learning framework for preference-based reinforcement learning that explicitly models reward uncertainty through ensemble distributional predictions. Applied to acrobatic quadrotor control, REC achieves 88.4% of shaped reward performance compared to 55.2% for standard Preference PPO, while reducing training variance across seeds. Policies trained with both

synthetic and human preference feedback transfer zero-shot to a real 220 g quadrotor, executing continuous powerloops and a novel vertical Figure-8 maneuver without any manually designed reward function or changes in hyperparameters. The observed 60.7% agreement between shaped rewards and human preferences further indicates that manual reward engineering may be insufficient for tasks where desired behavior is more naturally expressed through comparative judgments.

Several directions remain for future work. The preference collection process would benefit from multi-annotator studies and reduced viewpoint dependency to better characterize the consistency and robustness of preference signals. More broadly, extending REC to a wider range of agile flight maneuvers and robotic domains beyond quadrotors would further establish the generality of probabilistic preference-based learning.

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## APPENDIX

### A. Quadrotor Powerloop Shaped Reward

We design a shaped, Markovian reward for the PPO baseline and for synthetic preference generation. The reward consists of three components.

*a) Planar Penalty.:* Encourages movement in the  $xz$ -plane using the L1 distance to the plane. The drone’s position is given by  $\vec{p}_{drone}$ , with  $p_{planar}$  denoting the distance from the drone to the circle plane defined by center  $\vec{c}_{circle}$  and normal  $\vec{n}_{plane}$ :

$$p_{planar} = |(\vec{p}_{drone} - \vec{c}_{circle}) \cdot \vec{n}_{plane}|_1. \quad (18)$$

*b) Circular Motion Reward.:* Rewards tangential movement along a target circle. The vector  $\vec{t}$  is the tangent of the circle and  $\vec{v}_{circular,sat}$  is the drone’s velocity projected onto the circle plane and saturated at a maximum value:

$$r_{circ} = \vec{t} \cdot \vec{v}_{circular,sat}. \quad (19)$$

*c) Action Regularization.:* Penalizes high-frequency noise in actions for hardware safety. For body rates  $\omega_{xy}$ ,  $\omega_z$ , and thrust  $c$ :

$$p_{reg,i} = |c_{i,high}| + |c_{i,high}|^2. \quad (20)$$

The total reward is a weighted sum of these components:

$$r_{total} = \alpha \cdot r_{circ} - \beta \cdot p_{planar} - \sum_i \gamma_i \cdot p_{reg,i}, \quad (21)$$

where  $\alpha = 0.5$ ,  $\beta = 3$ ,  $\gamma_{\omega_{xy}} = \gamma_{\omega_z} = 0.008$ , and  $\gamma_{\omega_c} = 0.0001$ .

### B. Hyperparameters

The hyperparameters used in our experiments are summarized in Tables B1 and B2. Table B1 lists the PPO settings and Table B2 the preference-based method settings.

TABLE B1  
Hyperparameters of the PPO algorithm in the *walker-walk* and *flightmare* environments.

Hyperparameter	flightmare	walker-walk
$n_{envs}$	50	32
$n_{timesteps}$	30M	4M
$\gamma$	0.995	0.99
$\lambda_{GAE}$	0.95	0.92
$n_{epochs}$	10	20
$n_{steps}$	250	500
$\epsilon_{clip}$	0.4	0.4
$n_{batch}$	12,500	64
$\log \sigma_{init}$	-0.8	0.0
$\pi_{arch}$	[128, 128]	[256, 256, 256]
$\pi_{activation}$	Tanh	Tanh
$c_{entropy}$	0.001	0.0

TABLE B2

Hyperparameters of the preference-based algorithms in the *walker-walk* and *flightmare* environments. The pairing method for both environments is 50% ensemble disagreement and 50% random.

Hyperparameter	flightmare	walker-walk
$n_{\text{prefs}}$	1000	1000
$T_{\text{clip}}$	1.25 s	1.25 s
$f_{\text{init}}$ Initial preference fraction	0.2	0.1
$n_{\text{query}}$ Preference collection steps	10	10
$\Delta t_{\text{retrain}}$ Reward re-training interval steps	400K	16K
$n_{\text{ensemble}}$	5	3
$n_{\text{reset}}$	1	1
$\sigma_{\text{target}}$	0.05	0.05
$d_{\text{hidden}}^{\mathcal{R}}$	256	256
$n_{\text{layers}}^{\mathcal{R}}$	2	2
$\phi^{\mathcal{R}}$	Tanh	Tanh
$n_{\text{epochs}}^{\mathcal{R}}$	100	100
$\eta^{\mathcal{R}}$	0.0003	0.0003