Contents

Preface xi

Chapter 1: Motivation
§1 Why bother with measure theory? 1
§2 The cost and benefit of rigor 3
§3 Where to start: probabilities or expectations? 5
§4 The de Finetti notation 7
§5 Fair prices 11
§6 Problems 13
§7 Notes 14

Chapter 2: A modicum of measure theory
§1 Measures and sigma-fields 17
§2 Measurable functions 22
§3 Integrals 26
§4 Construction of integrals from measures 29
§5 Limit theorems 31
§6 Negligible sets 33
§7 $L^p$ spaces 36
§8 Uniform integrability 37
§9 Image measures and distributions 39
§10 Generating classes of sets 41
§11 Generating classes of functions 43
§12 Problems 45
§13 Notes 51

Chapter 3: Densities and derivatives
§1 Densities and absolute continuity 53
§2 The Lebesgue decomposition 58
§3 Distances and affinities between measures 59
§4 The classical concept of absolute continuity 65
§5 Vitali covering lemma 68
§6 Densities as almost sure derivatives 70
§7 Problems 71
§8 Notes 75

Chapter 4: Product spaces and independence
§1 Independence 77
§2 Independence of sigma-fields 80
§3 Construction of measures on a product space 83
§4 Product measures 88
§5 Beyond sigma-finiteness 93
§6 SLLN via blocking 95
§7 SLLN for identically distributed summands 97
§8 Infinite product spaces 99
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Conditioning</td>
<td>§9</td>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§10</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§1</td>
<td>Conditional distributions: the elementary case</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§2</td>
<td>Conditional distributions: the general case</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§3</td>
<td>Integration and disintegration</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§4</td>
<td>Conditional densities</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§5</td>
<td>Invariance</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§6</td>
<td>Kolmogorov’s abstract conditional expectation</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§7</td>
<td>Sufficiency</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§8</td>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>§9</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Chapter 6: Martingale et al. | §1 | What are they? | 138 |
| | §2 | Stopping times | 142 |
| | §3 | Convergence of positive supermartingales | 147 |
| | §4 | Convergence of submartingales | 151 |
| | §5 | Proof of the Krickeberg decomposition | 152 |
| | §6 | Uniform integrability | 153 |
| | §7 | Reversed martingales | 155 |
| | §8 | Symmetry and exchangeability | 159 |
| | §9 | Problems | 162 |
| | §10 | Notes | 166 |

| Chapter 7: Convergence in distribution | §1 | Definition and consequences | 169 |
| | §2 | Lindeberg’s method for the central limit theorem | 176 |
| | §3 | Multivariate limit theorems | 181 |
| | §4 | Stochastic order symbols | 182 |
| | §5 | Weakly convergent subsequences | 184 |
| | §6 | Problems | 186 |
| | §7 | Notes | 190 |

| Chapter 8: Fourier transforms | §1 | Definitions and basic properties | 193 |
| | §2 | Inversion formula | 195 |
| | §3 | A mystery? | 198 |
| | §4 | Convergence in distribution | 198 |
| | §5 | A martingale central limit theorem | 200 |
| | §6 | Multivariate Fourier transforms | 202 |
| | §7 | Cramér-Wold without Fourier transforms | 203 |
| | §8 | The Lévy-Cramér theorem | 205 |
| | §9 | Problems | 206 |
| | §10 | Notes | 208 |
Contents

CHAPTER 9: BROWNIAN MOTION
§1 Prerequisites 211
§2 Brownian motion and Wiener measure 213
§3 Existence of Brownian motion 215
*§4 Finer properties of sample paths 217
§5 Strong Markov property 219
*§6 Martingale characterizations of Brownian motion 222
*§7 Functionals of Brownian motion 226
*§8 Option pricing 228
§9 Problems 230
§10 Notes 234

CHAPTER 10: REPRESENTATIONS AND COUplings
§1 What is coupling? 237
§2 Almost sure representations 239
*§3 Strassen’s Theorem 242
*§4 The Yurinskii coupling 244
§5 Quantile coupling of Binomial with normal 248
§6 Haar coupling—the Hungarian construction 249
§7 The Komlós-Majós-Tusnády coupling 252
§8 Problems 256
§9 Notes 258

CHAPTER 11: EXPONENTIAL TAILS AND THE LAW OF THE ITERATED LOGARITHM
§1 LIL for normal summands 261
§2 LIL for bounded summands 264
*§3 Kolmogorov’s exponential lower bound 266
*§4 Identically distributed summands 268
§5 Problems 271
§6 Notes 272

CHAPTER 12: MULTIVARIATE NORMAL DISTRIBUTIONS
§1 Introduction 274
*§2 Fernique’s inequality 275
*§3 Proof of Fernique’s inequality 276
§4 Gaussian isoperimetric inequality 278
*§5 Proof of the isoperimetric inequality 280
§6 Problems 285
§7 Notes 287

APPENDIX A: MEASURES AND INTEGRALS
§1 Measures and inner measure 289
§2 Tightness 291
§3 Countable additivity 292
§4 Extension to the \(\cap_c\)-closure 294
§5 Lebesgue measure 295
§6 Integral representations 296
§7 Problems 300
§8 Notes 300
APPENDIX B: HILBERT SPACES
§1 Definitions 301
§2 Orthogonal projections 302
§3 Orthonormal bases 303
§4 Series expansions of random processes 305
§5 Problems 306
§6 Notes 306

APPENDIX C: CONVEXITY
§1 Convex sets and functions 307
§2 One-sided derivatives 308
§3 Integral representations 310
§4 Relative interior of a convex set 312
§5 Separation of convex sets by linear functionals 313
§6 Problems 315
§7 Notes 316

APPENDIX D: BINOMIAL AND NORMAL DISTRIBUTIONS
§1 Tails of the normal distributions 317
§2 Quantile coupling of Binomial with normal 320
§3 Proof of the approximation theorem 324
§4 Notes 328

APPENDIX E: MARTINGALES IN CONTINUOUS TIME
§1 Filtrations, sample paths, and stopping times 329
§2 Preservation of martingale properties at stopping times 332
§3 Supermartingales from their rational skeletons 334
§4 The Brownian filtration 336
§5 Problems 338
§6 Notes 338

APPENDIX F: DISINTEGRATION OF MEASURES
§1 Representation of measures on product spaces 339
§2 Disintegrations with respect to a measurable map 342
§3 Problems 343
§4 Notes 345

INDEX 347
Preface

This book began life as a set of handwritten notes, distributed to students in my one-semester graduate course on probability theory, a course that had humble aims: to help the students understand results such as the strong law of large numbers, the central limit theorem, conditioning, and some martingale theory. Along the way they could expect to learn a little measure theory and maybe even a smattering of functional analysis, but not as much as they would learn from a course on Measure Theory or Functional Analysis.

In recent years the audience has consisted mainly of graduate students in statistics and economics, most of whom have not studied measure theory. Most of them have no intention of studying measure theory systematically, or of becoming professional probabilists, but they do want to learn some rigorous probability theory—in one semester.

Faced with the reality of an audience that might have neither the time nor the inclination to devote itself completely to my favorite subject, I sought to compress the essentials into a course as self-contained as I could make it. I tried to pack into the first few weeks of the semester a crash course in measure theory, with supplementary exercises and a whirlwind exposition (Appendix A) for the enthusiasts. I tried to eliminate duplication of mathematical effort if it served no useful role. After many years of chopping and compressing, the material that I most wanted to cover all fit into a one-semester course, divided into 25 lectures, each lasting from 60 to 75 minutes. My handwritten notes filled fewer than a hundred pages.

I had every intention of making my little stack of notes into a little book. But I couldn’t resist expanding a bit here and a bit there, adding useful reference material, spelling out ideas that I had struggled with on first acquaintance, slipping in extra topics that my students have seemed to need when writing dissertations, and pulling in material from other courses I have taught and neat tricks I have learned from my friends. And soon it wasn’t so little any more.

Many of the additions ended up in starred Sections, which contain harder material or topics that can be skipped over without loss of continuity.

My treatment includes a few eccentricities that might upset some of my professional colleagues. My most obvious departure from tradition is in the use of linear functional notation for expectations, an approach I first encountered in books by de Finetti. I attempt to explain the virtues of this notation in the first two Chapters. Another slight novelty—at least for anyone already exposed to the Kolmogorov interpretation of conditional expectations—appears in my treatment of conditioning, in Chapter 5. For many years I have worried about the wide gap between the free-wheeling conditioning calculations of an elementary probability course and the formal manipulations demanded by rigor. I claim that a treatment starting from the idea of conditional distributions offers one way of bridging the gap,
at least for many of the statistical applications of conditioning that have troubled me the most.

The twelve Chapters and six Appendixes contain general explanations, remarks, opinions, and blocks of more formal material. Theorems and Lemmas contain the most important mathematical details. Examples contain gentler, or less formal, explanations and illustrations. Supporting theoretical material is presented either in the form of Exercises, with terse solutions, or as Problems (at the ends of the Chapters) that work step-by-step through material that missed the cutoff as Exercises, Lemmas, or Theorems. Some Problems are routine, to give students an opportunity to digest the ideas in the text without great mental effort; some Problems are hard.

A possible one-semester course

Here is a list of the material that I usually try to cover in the one-semester graduate course.

Chapter 1: Spend one lecture on why measure theory is worth the effort, using a few of the Examples as illustrations. Introduce de Finetti notation, identifying sets with their indicator functions and writing $P$ for both probabilities of sets and expectations of random variables. Mention, very briefly, the fair price Section as an alternative to the frequency interpretation.

Chapter 2: Cover the unstarred Sections carefully, but omitting many details from the Examples. Postpone Section 7 until Chapter 3. Postpone Section 8 until Chapter 6. Describe briefly the generating class theorem for functions, from Section 11, without proofs.

Chapter 3: Cover Section 1, explaining the connection with the elementary notion of a density. Take a short excursion into Hilbert space (explaining the projection theorem as an extension of the result for Euclidean spaces) before presenting the simple version of Radon-Nikodym. Mention briefly the classical concept of absolute continuity, but give no details. Maybe say something about total variation.

Chapter 4: Cover Sections 1 and 2, leaving details of some arguments to the students. Give a reminder about generating classes of functions. Describe the construction of $\mu \otimes \Lambda$, only for a finite kernel $\Lambda$, via the iterated integral. Cover product measures, using some of the Examples from Section 4. Explain the need for the blocking idea from Section 6, using the Maximal Inequality to preview the idea of a stopping time. Mention the truncation idea behind the version of the SLLN for independent, identically distributed random variables with finite first moments, but skip most of the proof.

Chapter 5: Discuss Section 1 carefully. Cover the high points of Sections 2 through 4. (They could be skipped without too much loss of continuity, but I prefer not to move straight into Kolmogorov conditioning.) Cover Section 6.
Preface

Chapter 6: Cover Sections 1 through 4, but skipping over some Examples. Characterize uniformly integrable martingales, using Section 6 and some of the material postponed from Section 8 of Chapter 2, unless short of time.

Chapter 7: Cover the first four Sections, skipping some of the examples of central limit theorems near the end of Section 2. Downplay multivariate results.

Chapter 8: Cover Sections 1, 2, 4, and 6.

If time is left over, cover a topic from the remaining Chapters.

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Finally, I thank Lauren Cowles for years of good advice, and for her inexhaustible patience with an author who could never stop tinkering.

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