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Accurate and Efficient Polymorph Energy Ranking with XDM-corrected hybrid DFT †

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Accurate and efficient computation of relative energies of molecular-crystal polymorphs is of central importance for solid-state pharmaceuticals and in the field of crystal engineering. In recent years, dispersion-corrected density-functional theory (DFT) has emerged as the pre-eminent energy-ranking method for crystal structure prediction (CSP). However, planewave implementations of these methods are hindered by poor scaling for large unit cells and are limited to semi-local functionals that suffer from delocalisation error. In this work, we demonstrate that a recent implementation of the exchange-hole dipole moment (XDM) dispersion correction in the Fritz Haber Institute *ab initio* molecular simulation (FHI-aims) package provides excellent performance for the energy ranking step of CSP. Thanks to its use of highly optimized numerical atom-centred orbitals, FHI-aims provides effectively linear scaling with system size and allows efficient use of hybrid density functionals with minimal basisset incompleteness errors. We assess the performance of this methodology for the 26 compounds that formed the first 6 CSP blind tests. The hybrid results show significant improvements for 4/26 compounds, where delocalisation error affects the quality of predicted crystal-energy landscapes.

1 Introduction

Molecular crystals are of central importance as pharmaceuticals, ^{1–3} energetic materials, ^{4,5} and in the emerging field of organic electronics. ^{6,7} Due to the sensitivity of solid-state properties such as solubility and charge transport on crystal packing, one must identify all likely polymorphs when developing compounds for these applications. ^{8–13} The problem of theoretical identification of isolable polymorphs is termed first-principles crystalstructure prediction (CSP).

Periodically, the Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre (CCDC) organises blind tests of CSP methods in which crystal structures of small sets of compounds are determined by x-ray diffraction, but are not released to the community until researchers have attempted to predict the structure(s) of the isolated polymorph(s).^{14–19} There are two challenges at the core of CSP – that of exhaustive structure generation and that of accurate energy ranking of the resulting candidates. Ideally, the experimentally observed polymorph(s) should be among the most energetically stable of the putative crystal structures.

The focus of the present work is on the energy-ranking step

of CSP, where computational methods that provide well-balanced descriptions of electrostatics, charge transfer, polarisation, nonbonded repulsion, and London dispersion are required. The advent of dispersion corrections has opened the door for the use of periodic-boundary density-functional theory (DFT) for CSP, as illustrated by Neumann and coworkers^{20–23} in the 5th CSP blind test¹⁸ and further demonstrated in many subsequent studies.^{13,24–37} As dispersion-corrected DFT outperforms alternative energy-ranking methods for CSP, it is essential to have a DFTbased dispersion method that is as accurate and efficient as possible for molecular crystals.

Many successful applications of DFT to molecular crystals have used planewave basis sets and the projector augmented-wave method. 13,20-25,28,29,38,39 However, such an approach has two key limitations. The first is that planewave methods have unfavourable computational scaling for large unit cells. This drastically limits their application to CSP since many polymorphs of fairly complex active pharmaceutical compounds, and other materials of interest, can contain 8 or more molecules per unit cell. The second is that planewave calculations are limited to generalised gradient approximation (GGA) methods and do not allow routine use of hybrid density functionals. This is important due to delocalisation error, ^{40–42} which is prevalent in GGAs. Delocalisation error can affect polymorph ranking for flexible molecules where there is a competition between intramolecular conjugation and intermolecular interactions, 29,43,44 as well as for organic salts²⁸ and acid-base co-crystal systems.⁴⁵ Hybrid func-

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Fig. 1 Structures of the compounds provided by the CCDC for the first 6 CSP blind tests.

tionals typically provide better performance than GGAs for noncovalent interactions in finite molecular systems, ^{42,46–49} particularly in cases with significant delocalisation error, and we see similar improvement for solids based on lattice energies of smallmolecule crystals.^{50,51}

To avoid the limitations of planewave basis sets, we turn to numerical atom-centered orbitals (NAOs). NAOs of finite extent are a highly promising alternative since they allow elimination of integrals involving distant atomic centers in DFT calculations, resulting in formal linear scaling for large systems. ⁵² In particular, the Fritz Haber Institut *ab initio* materials simulation (FHI-aims) package ^{53–55} is a very robust NAO code that, thanks to its design, has minimal basis-set incompleteness. Implementation in FHIaims has allowed application of the many-body dispersion (MBD) method, ^{56,57} paired with hybrid DFT, to molecular-crystal benchmarks and CSP studies. ^{32–37} Moreover, we recently implemented our exchange-hole dipole moment (XDM) dispersion in FHI-aims and showed that, when paired with selected hybrid functionals, it provides unprecedented accuracy for evaluation of molecularcrystal lattice energies. ⁵¹

In this article we assess the performance of XDM paired with hybrid functionals and the light NAO basis set for the energy ranking step of CSP. Specifically, we consider the 26 compounds that formed the first 6 CSP blind tests, shown in Figure $1.^{14-19}$ Of

the submitted putative crystal structures, the experimental polymorph is consistently ranked among the 10 most-stable unique candidates. Use of a hybrid functional with 50% exact-exchange mixing is shown to significantly improve on GGA results for challenging crystal-energy landscapes where delocalisation error in GGA functionals is known to adversely impact the ranking.

2 Theory and Computational Methods

2.1 The XDM Dispersion Correction

XDM^{58,59} is a post-self-consistent correction to the energy computed with some base density functional approximation (DFA):

$$E = E_{\rm DFA} + E_{\rm XDM}.$$
 (1)

The XDM dispersion energy itself is expressed as a sum over all pairs of atoms, i and j, in the system

$$E_{\rm XDM} = -\frac{1}{2} \sum_{n=6,8,10} \sum_{ij} \frac{C_{n,ij}}{R_{ij}^n + R_{\rm vdW,ij}^n},$$
(2)

where R_{ij} is the internuclear distance. In a solid, the sum runs over all surrounding unit cells. Here, C_6 , C_8 , and C_{10} are termed the atomic dispersion coefficients, which are functions of the selfconsistent electron density, its gradient and Laplacian, the kineticenergy density, and Hirshfeld partitioning weights. As a result of their density and derivative dependence, the dispersion coefficients are highly responsive to changes in the chemical environment of an atom due to charge transfer, coordination, hydrogen bonding, and even weaker van der Waals interactions with distant atoms. 60

The $R_{vdW,ij}$ in Eqn. 2 is the sum of effective van der Waals radii of atoms *i* and *j*, which is defined using an average of three possible ratios of the dispersion coefficients and involves two empirical fit parameters, a_1 and a_2 :

$$R_{\rm vdW,ij} = \frac{a_1}{3} \left[\left(\frac{C_{8,ij}}{C_{6,ij}} \right)^{\frac{1}{2}} + \left(\frac{C_{10,ij}}{C_{8,ij}} \right)^{\frac{1}{2}} + \left(\frac{C_{10,ij}}{C_{6,ij}} \right)^{\frac{1}{4}} \right] + a_2.$$
(3)

The a_1 and a_2 parameters are fit once for each choice of density functional and basis set by minimising the root-mean-square percent error in computed binding energies of 49 molecular dimers.^{46,61} After this, the parameters are kept fixed and are transferable to all elements of the periodic table, as well as between finite-molecular and periodic-boundary calculations.⁵¹

2.2 Exchange-Correlation Functionals

All density-functional dispersion corrections must be paired with a base DFA. In this work, we consider three DFA exchangecorrelation functionals of the general form

$$E_{\rm XC} = (1 - a_{\rm X})E_{\rm X}^{\rm B86b} + a_{\rm X}E_{\rm X}^{\rm HF} + E_{\rm C}^{\rm PBE},$$
(4)

which combines the B86b⁶² exchange functional with PBE⁶³ correlation. B86b is our exchange functional of choice for molecular crystals due to its high accuracy for describing non-bonded repulsion.^{61,64–67} The parameter a_X controls the extent of exact-exchange mixing, and we will consider values of 0, 0.25, and 0.50, which correspond to the B86bPBE GGA, and the B86bPBE-25X and B86bPBE-50X hybrid functionals, respectively.^{50,51}

2.3 Computational Methods

All calculations in this work were performed with the FHI-aims implementation of XDM dispersion.⁵¹ All atomic positions and lattice vectors of molecular crystals were fully optimised with B86bPBE-XDM. Subsequent single-point energy calculations were performed with the B86bPBE-25X and B86bPBE-50X hybrids, again paired with XDM. Calculations used the "light" (double- ζ) NAO basis sets for computational efficiency, along with the dense integration grids (including Lebedev meshes up to 434 angular grid points) that are used by default in conjunction with the tight settings. The **k**-point grids were chosen to have dimensions $n_1 \times n_2 \times n_3$ such that

$$n_i = \inf[\max(1, R_k | b_i | + 0.5)], \tag{5}$$

where $|b_i|$ is the magnitude of the corresponding reciprocal lattice vector and the length parameter, R_k , was set to 50 Bohr.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Summary of Polymorph Ranking

Results of the energy ranking of putative crystal structures for the 26 compounds consituting the first 6 CSP blind tests are summarized in Table 1. The B86bPBE-XDM results are similar to those from previous planewave calculations performed with the same methodology, ^{28,29} confirming the minimal effects of basis-set incompleteness in these NAO calcaultions. Overall, the GGA identifies an experimental polymorph as the minimum-energy structure in 17/26 cases. This fraction increases to 18/26 and 19/26 cases with the B86bPBE-25X-XDM and B86bPBE-50X-XDM hybrid functionals, respectively.

Table 1 Ranking of the (most stable) experimental polymorph on crystal energy landscapes computed with the B86bPBE-XDM (GGA), B86bPBE-25X-XDM (25X), and B86bPBE-50X-XDM (50X) functionals. Also shown is the energy (ΔE , in kcal/mol) of that experimental polymorph relative to the most stable candidate structure on each landscape.

Compound	GGA		25X		50X	
	Rank	ΔE	Rank	ΔE	Rank	ΔE
Ι	1^a	0.00	1^b	0.00	1^b	0.00
II	4	0.26	2	0.17	2	0.12
III	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
IV	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
V	4	0.46	4	0.45	4	0.37
VI	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
VII	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
VIII	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
IX	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
Х	2	0.22	2	0.09	1	0.00
XI	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XII	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XIII	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XIV	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XV	2	0.06	2	0.19	2	0.28
XVI	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XVII	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XVIII	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XIX	6	1.03	4	0.52	2	0.03
XX	4	1.59	4	1.54	6	1.60
XXI	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XXII	9	0.65	3	0.12	2	0.01
XXIII	2^c	0.18	1^c	0.00	1^c	0.00
XXIV	8	0.47	3	0.18	2	0.09
XXV	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00
XXVI	1	0.00	1	0.00	1	0.00

^{*a*}polymorph 1, ^{*b*}polymorph 2, ^{*c*}polymorph c

Notably, with the 50% hybrid, an experimental polymorph is ranked second in another 5/26 cases. In two of these, the experimental form is nearly degenerate with the minimum-energy candidate, while it lies less than 0.3 kcal/mol above the minimum otherwise. For compound V, the experimental structure is ranked 4th in energy, but still lies within 0.4 kcal/mol of the minimum. These are all sufficiently small energy differences that thermal free-energy contributions (which are generally <2 kJ/mol)^{68,69} may be sufficient to reverse the ordering. However, evaluating



Fig. 2 The experimental (left) and the DFT-predicted minimum-energy (right) crystal structures for compound XX, viewed in the *ac* plane.

the thermal corrections requires very computationally expensive phonon calculations, which is beyond the scope of the present work.

3.2 Compound XX

All three functionals considered perform consistently poorly for the large, flexible compound XX (benzyl-(4-(4-methyl-5-(p-tolylsulfonyl)-1,3-thiazol-2-yl)phenyl)carbamate) from the 5th blind test, the structure of which is shown in Figure 1 . Here, the minimum-energy structure is predicted to be more stable than the isolated experimental form by 1.6 kcal/mol. This is much larger than the contributions from thermal effects seen for small, rigid molecules.^{68,69} However, it would be expected that the magnitude of the thermal free-energy corrections would increase with the number of rotatable bonds, leading to much larger contributions for compounds XX and XXIII, relative to the other members of the blind test set. Thus, one potential reason that compound XX is an outlier for DFT is a more significant contribution from thermal effects.

Another potential source of error for application of DFT to flexible molecules is the conformational energy. ^{43,44} Examination of the structures shows that the DFA-predicted minimum has a different molecular conformation than the experimental form. However, since the conjugated central portion of the molecule must remain planar, the conformational differences primarily involve a 180° degree twist of the amide group. This conformational change should be well described by DFT and not responsible for a large energy reordering of the putative crystal structures.

An alternative explanation for the relatively high energy of the experimental structure may be that the crystallisation is controlled by the rugosity.⁷⁰ This refers to the roughness of a cleaved crystal surface – crystals with a smooth cleavage plane should be more likely to form than those with a rough surface. Examination of the experimental and DFT-minimum crystal structures shows that the former has a relatively smooth cleavage plane, while the latter does not (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 3 Computed crystal energy landscapes for four compounds taken from previous CSP blind tests: X, XIX, XXII, and XXIV (top to bottom). Results are shown for full geometry relaxations using B86bPBE-XDM (left), as well as single-point energy calculations with B86bPBE-25X-XDM (middle) and B86bPBE-50X-XDM (right).

3.3 Effects of Delocalisation Error on Landscapes

To highlight the improved performance of hybrid functionals based on B86bPBE-XDM over the parent GGA for CSP, we focus on four challenging crystal-energy landscapes. The first two are for compounds X (2-acetamido-4,5-dinitrotoluene)¹⁶ and XIX (1,8-naphthyridinium fumarate),¹⁸ where the delocalisation error inherent in GGA functionals has been previously shown to adversely affect the predicted landscapes.^{28,29,43} This results in one or more candidate structures being predicted to lie lower in



Fig. 4 The experimental (left) and the DFT-predicted minimum-energy (right) crystal structures for compound XXIV, viewed in the yz plane.

energy than the known polymorph, as shown in Figure 3.

The crystal energy landscape of compound X has been extensively investigated by both ourselves²⁹ and by Beran and coworkers.⁴³ Here, there are two competing low-energy structures. The experimental form has the acetamide group twisted somewhat out of plane to maximise intermolecular hydrogen bonding. Conversely, GGA functionals favour a competing structure in which the acetamide group lies in plane to maximise conjugation. The energy ordering can be corrected by evaluating the conformational energy change of the isolated molecule using a correlatedwavefunction theory, such as MP2D.⁴³ Conversely, compound XIX is an organic salt with rigid molecular components. Salts are problematic for GGA functionals, which are known to give large errors for polarization and charge transfer.^{42,45,71–74} Here, GGA functionals favour the structure with the most cooperative H-bonding network.²⁸

The other two landscapes highlighted in Fig. 3 are for compounds XXII (tricyano-1,4-dithiino[c]-isothiazole) and XXIV (chloride salt hydrate of (Z)-3-((diaminomethyl)thio)acrylic acid) from the 6th CSP blind test. 19 Like compound XIX, compound XXIV is also an organic salt, so we again expect significant delocalisation error. Examination of the minimum-energy GGA structure shows an unusual arrangement in which the H atom of the carboxlic acid moiety points away from the sp² oxygen to form a hydrogen bond to the chloride (see Fig. 4). It is likely that the strength of this ionic H-bond is overestimated by the GGA functional. Finally, it is not immediately obvious how delocalisation error would affect the crystal-energy landscape of compound XXII. Examination of the minimum-energy GGA and experimental crystal structures reveals that, while the experimental structure has the molecules stacked in dimers, the GGA minimum has all the molecules aligned along the c axis (see Fig. 5). It is possible that this results in excessive polarisation at the GGA level, overestimating the electrostatic stabilization.

Hybrid functionals, particular those with near 50% exactexchange mixing, are known to reduce delocalisation error. As such we expect B86bPBE-50-XDM to significantly improve the crystal energy landscapes in cases where this error plays a role.



Fig. 5 The experimental (left) and the DFT-predicted minimum-energy (right) crystal structures for compound XXII, viewed in the ac plane.

The hybrid results shown in Figure 3 confirm this to be the case. B86bPBE-50-XDM predicts the experimental form of compound X to be lowest in energy. Moreover, it almost entirely corrects the energy ranking for compound XXII and both organic salts, with the most-stable candidate structures now nearly degenerate with the experimental forms.

4 Summary

In this work, we applied a recent NAO implementation of the XDM dispersion model to rank the submitted structures for the first 6 CSP blind tests. Unlike planewave basis sets, NAOs allow efficient use of hybrid DFT, so the B86bPBE GGA and two related hybrid functionals with 25% and 50% exact exchange mixing were considered. Pairing XDM with the B86bPBE-50X hybrid was found to rank an isolated experimental polymorph as the most stable structure for 19/26 compounds considered, and as the second most-stable structure for another 5/26. In these latter 5 cases, the DFT minimum and the experimental form were separated by less than 0.3 kcal/mol, meaning that thermal freeenergy corrections from the phonons may be sufficient to reverse the ranking. The only clear failure of hybrid DFT occurred for compound XX, where the experimental structure lies 1.6 kcal/mol above the DFT minimum - we propose that this more stable form is not observed due to a combination of thermal effects and its high rugosity. We would encourage additional experimental polymorph screening for this compound to determine if any of the low-energy DFT structures can be crystallised. Finally, B86bPBE-50X-XDM was found to provide excellent performance for several challenging crystal energy landscapes where GGA calculations suffer from delocalisation error. This includes both cases where the error affects intramolecular conformational energies, and intermolecular charge transfer, making it a more general approach than monomer energy corrections. Overall, the FHI-aims implementation of XDM-corrected hybrid functionals provides an unprecedented combination of accuracy and efficiency for DFTbased modelling of molecular crystals that should facilitate highthroughput use of first-principles CSP.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare

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