

# DE vs. PSO: A Performance Assessment for Expensive Problems

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**Abstract**—This paper investigates the suitability of the Particle Swarm Optimization (PSO) and the Differential Evolution (DE) algorithms in solving expensive optimization problems. Eight PSO variants, and eight DE variants are experimentally compared among each other. The Comparing Continuous Optimizers (COCO) methodology was adopted in comparing these variants on the noiseless BBOB testbed. Based on the results, we provide useful insights regarding the algorithms' relative efficiency and effectiveness under an expensive budget of function evaluations; and draw suggestions about which algorithm should be used depending on what we know about our optimization problem in terms of evaluation budget, dimensionality, and function structure. Furthermore, we propose possible future research directions addressing the algorithms limitations. Overall, DE variants perform well in low dimensions, whereas in higher dimensions, several PSO variants surpass DE algorithms. Among the top performers, JADE and  $\chi$ PSO are the robust algorithms for solving expensive budget problems.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the optimization community has been facing great challenges in designing computational methods/frameworks and algorithms that can successfully deal with the complexity of real-world optimization problems. Some of these problems are exceptionally difficult to solve exactly, due to the absence of objective function information [1], where the sole source of information about the objective function is available through point-wise evaluation (also known as black-box optimization). Typically, a single function evaluation requires some computational resources (e.g., time, money, power); an evaluation of one candidate solution might take a whole laboratory experiment [2]. Hence, it is desired for an optimization algorithm to be capable of achieving a good-quality solution with a limited (expensive) budget of function evaluation. However, an expensive budget setting is not the only challenge. Increased dimensionality of the solution space; differentiability, multi-modality and non-separability of the objective function are common in real-world problems. Subsequently, conventional methods fail to provide solutions on complex multimodal problems. Nevertheless, nature-inspired optimization algorithms, being simple and efficient, have emerged as an attractive alternative solver for such applications [3].

The two most promising optimization algorithms for solving complex optimization problems in the evolutionary com-

putation (EC) community are Particle Swarm Optimization (PSO) [4] and Differential Evolution (DE) [5]. Recently [6], the performance of some DE variants algorithm on the BBOB testbed [7], [8] has been evaluated for cheap-budget settings. A similar study was conducted on the basic PSO algorithm [9] where it exhibited promising characteristics. Current state-of-the-art research in DE and PSO, on the other hand, has significantly enhanced their performance, and introduced a diverse collection of variants. The introduction of DE and PSO variants makes the picture unclear about which algorithm is suitable for an optimization problem, and it becomes even more puzzling under expensive-budget settings as studies of evolutionary algorithms are often based on a relatively cheap budget of function evaluations [10].

This paper aims to examine the relative effectiveness and efficiency of PSO and DE variants in solving expensive-budget optimization problems. Through experimental evaluation, it marks the differences in them; and investigates the suitability of the algorithms for various optimization problems. Furthermore, it draws several concluding points that may be fruitful for the EC community.

To achieve the paper's goals, the experimental evaluation must be able to discover and distinguish the good features of the variants over others, and show their differences over different stages of the search for various goals and situations. We have adopted the Comparing Continuous Optimizer (COCO) methodology [11] as it meets our requirements. It comes with a testbed of 24 scalable noiseless functions [8] addressing such real-world difficulties as ill-conditioning, multi-modality, and dimensionality.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section II provides a brief description of the selected DE and PSO variants. In Section III, the numerical assessment of the algorithms is presented, starting with the experimental setup (Section III-A); afterwards, the procedure for evaluating the algorithms' performance is elaborated (Section III-B); followed by a discussion of the results (Section III-C). Section IV summarizes the main conclusions from this study, and suggests possible directions towards better PSO and DE algorithms for expensive-budget settings.

## II. SELECTED DE & PSO ALGORITHMS

The PSO and DE algorithms have been a hot topic of research in the past two decades for performance improve-

**TABLE I:** DE and PSO variants considered in this paper. Shaded algorithms are the top 3 according to our experiments under DE and PSO category.

DE Algorithms	Description/
DE [5]	the classical algorithm; a population of candidate solutions undergoes mutation, crossover, and selection operations.
JADE [12]	tunes the mutation factor and the crossover probability over successive generations. Moreover, it employs a more explorative mutation strategy from the current generation, and an archive of parent solutions with better offspring.
DEAE [13]	derives an adaptive encoding technique for DE to make the search independent of the coordinate system.
DEctpb [14]	employs a mutation strategy similar to that of JADE, but with no adaptation.
JADEb[14]	employs DE's mutation strategy, but follows JADE's parameter adaptation technique.
MVDE [15]	applies several mutation operators; the next generation is produced via a tournament-selection process.
RL-SHADE [10]	improves on JADE by using a historical memory of successful parameter settings to guide the selection of future parameter values, its parameters are further tuned using the automated algorithm configuration tool, SMAC [16]. RL-SHADE has a restart strategy and reduces the population size linearly.
DE-F-AUC [17]	chooses among several mutation strategies based on their success profile using a multi-armed bandit technique.
PSO Algorithms	Description
PSO [4]	the classical algorithm; a population of candidate solutions mimicks the collective behaviour of bird swarm
PSO-cf [18]	introduces a constriction factor to control the magnitude of particles flight
FIPS [19]	introduces a novel update mechanism through weighted sum average of all the particles
UPSO [20]	considers both local and global search in every step of the search process
CLPSO [21]	particles learn from any better performing particle
DMSPSO [22]	utilizes a novel dynamically changing neighbourhood topology for search process
SRPSO [23]	incorporates two unique learning strategies, namely, self-regulating inertia weight and self-perception on the global search direction
iSRPSO [24]	introduces guidance based directional update strategy for lesser performing particles

ment. In recent years, several promising variants of both the algorithms have been proposed and showed significant improvements in locating the optimum solutions. Here, we present the selected DE and PSO variants in this evaluation study. The selected algorithms are briefly described in Table I. The top 3 performing variants in each category are shaded in grey.

### III. NUMERICAL ASSESSMENT

#### A. Setup

For DE variants, the experimental setup can be found as follows. DE, JADE, and DEAE's settings are of [6]; DEctpb, JADEb's in [14]; MVDE's in [15], RL-SHADE's in [10], DE-F-AUC's in [17]. For PSO variants, we ran the selected PSO variants on 24 functions (15 instances per function) of the BBOB testbed with a budget of  $10^3 \times D$  function evaluations. We used a MATLAB implementation of the algorithms retrieved from <http://www.ntu.edu.sg/home/epnsugan/>, with a modification on the terminating criteria of the variants to stop

if the target function value  $f_t$  is achieved. The parameters of all the PSO variants are set to their standard values provided in the codes. The choice of the swarm size is not trivial; for DMSPSO, we used a swarm size of 60 as it was used by its authors [22]; for the rest of the variants, a swarm size of 50 is used as a popular choice for many numerical assessments of PSO algorithms. Investigating the effect of the swarm size is beyond the scope of this paper.

#### B. Performance Evaluation Procedure

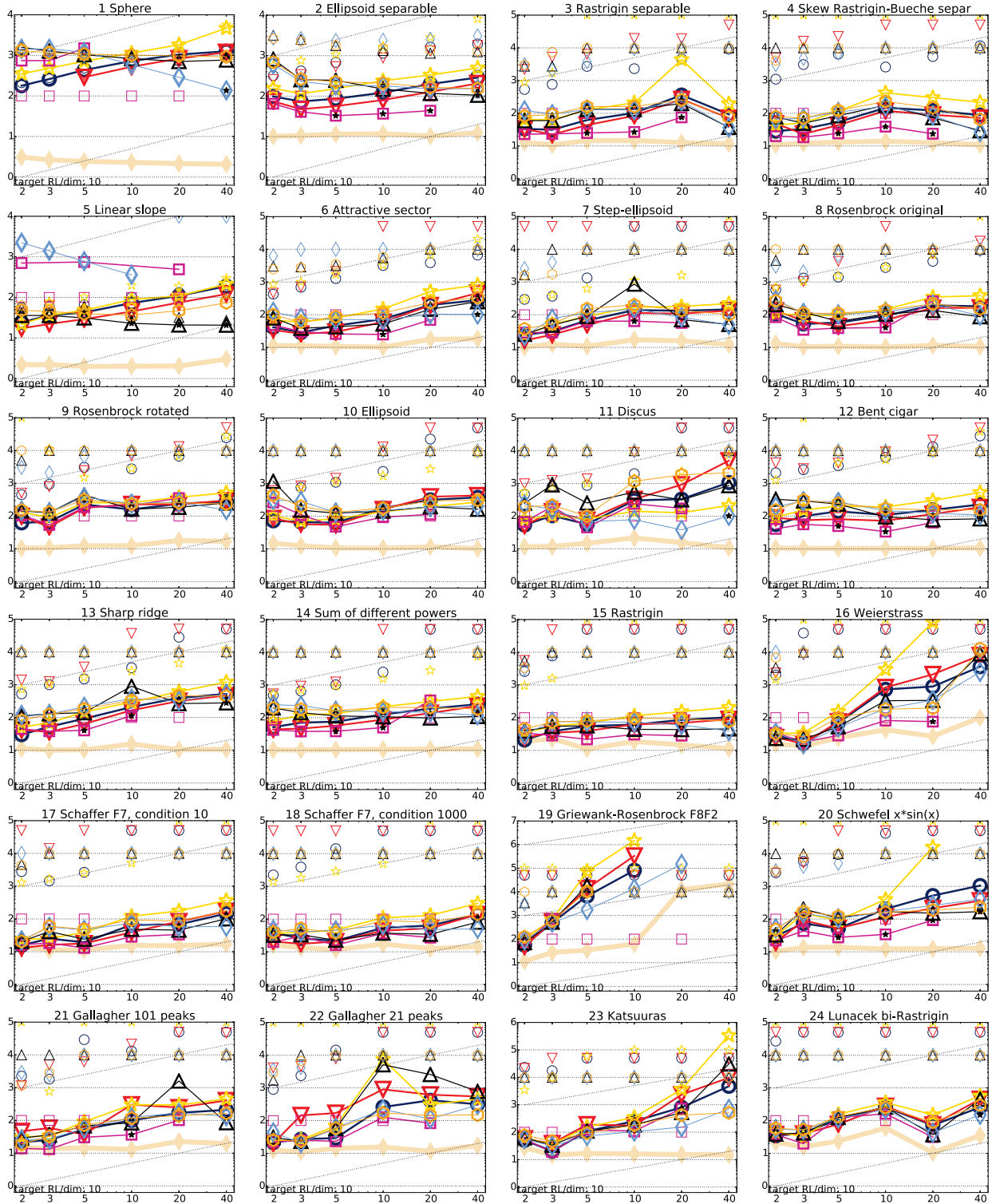
The performance experiments are set up according to [11], where each algorithm is run on the functions given in [7], [8] with multiple trials per function. A set of target function values is specified per function. The algorithms are evaluated based on the number of function evaluations required to reach a target. The Expected Running Time (ERT) used in the figures and tables, depends on a given target function value,  $f_t = f_{\text{opt}} + \Delta f$ , and is computed over all relevant trials as the number of function evaluations executed during each trial while the best function value did not reach  $f_t$ , summed over all trials and divided by the number of trials that actually reached  $f_t$  [11], [25]. **Statistical significance** is tested with the rank-sum test for a given target  $\Delta f_t$  using, for each trial, either the number of needed function evaluations to reach  $\Delta f_t$  (inverted and multiplied by  $-1$ ), or, if the target was not reached, the best  $\Delta f$ -value achieved, measured only up to the smallest number of overall function evaluations for any unsuccessful trial under consideration. As we are interested in expensive settings, the results are shown for function evaluations  $\leq 1000 \times D$ .

#### C. Performance Evaluation Discussion

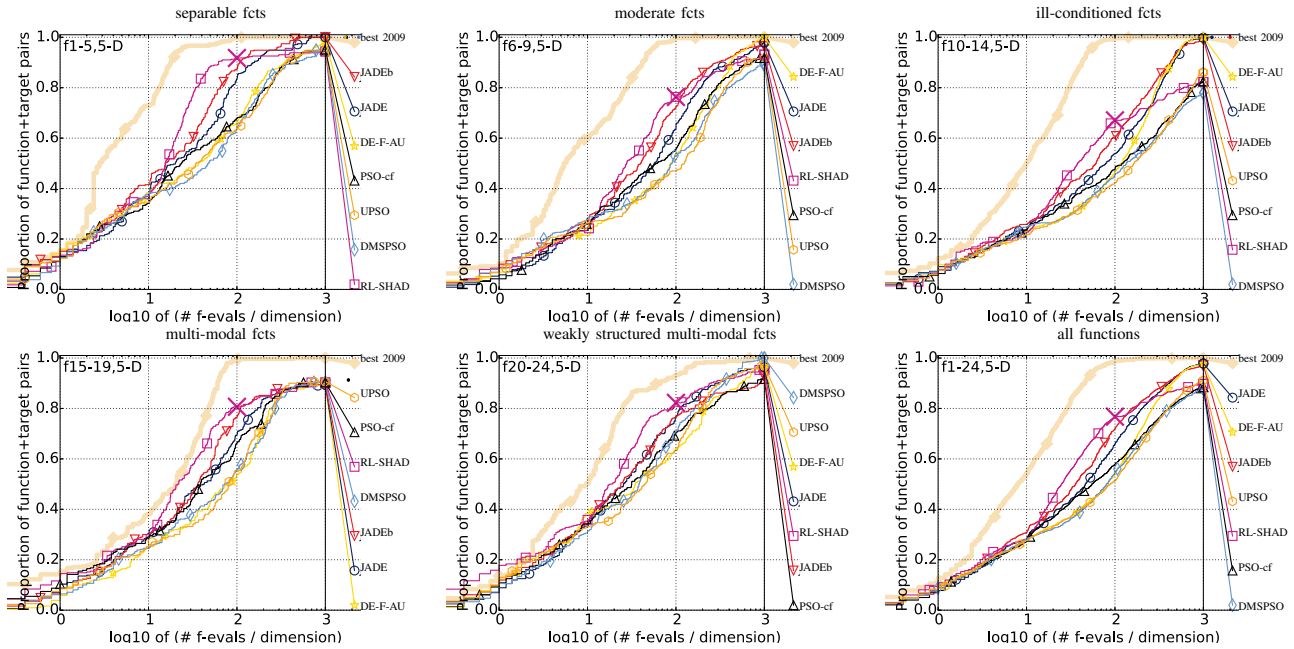
Results for the six selected algorithms JADE, DE-F-AUC, JADEb, PSO-cf, DMSPSO, and UPSO<sup>1</sup> are reported in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5; and in Tables II and III. Although RL-SHADE is not among the top three DE variants, it exhibits an interesting performance. We show its behaviour in 2, 3, and 4. Overall, Fig. 1 shows that the ERT of all the algorithms grows roughly on a quadratic order with respect to the problem dimensionality for most of the functions; the dimensionality of the Katsuuras function ( $f_{23}$ ) plays a vital role in its difficulty. One can notice the spread of the algorithms performance becomes more pronounced with higher dimensions. Based on the rest of the figures and tables, the following can be stated about the algorithms.

1) *DE variants:* In general, the performance of DE-F-AUC relatively degrades with increasing problem dimensions. JADE shows a robust topping performance on moderate and ill-conditioned functions with low- as well as high-dimension search space. Multi-modal and weakly structured multi-modal functions pose as hard problems for DE variants. RL-SHADE is presented here, although it is not among the top, as it showed a very promising performance. Note that it has only been given an evaluation budget of  $100D$  (where the rest were given  $> 1000D$ ). Within its allowed budget, RL-SHADE tops the rest of all algorithms. Running RL-SHADE for  $1000D$  was not straightforward, because it required an involved set up and a training phase with the SMAC tool.

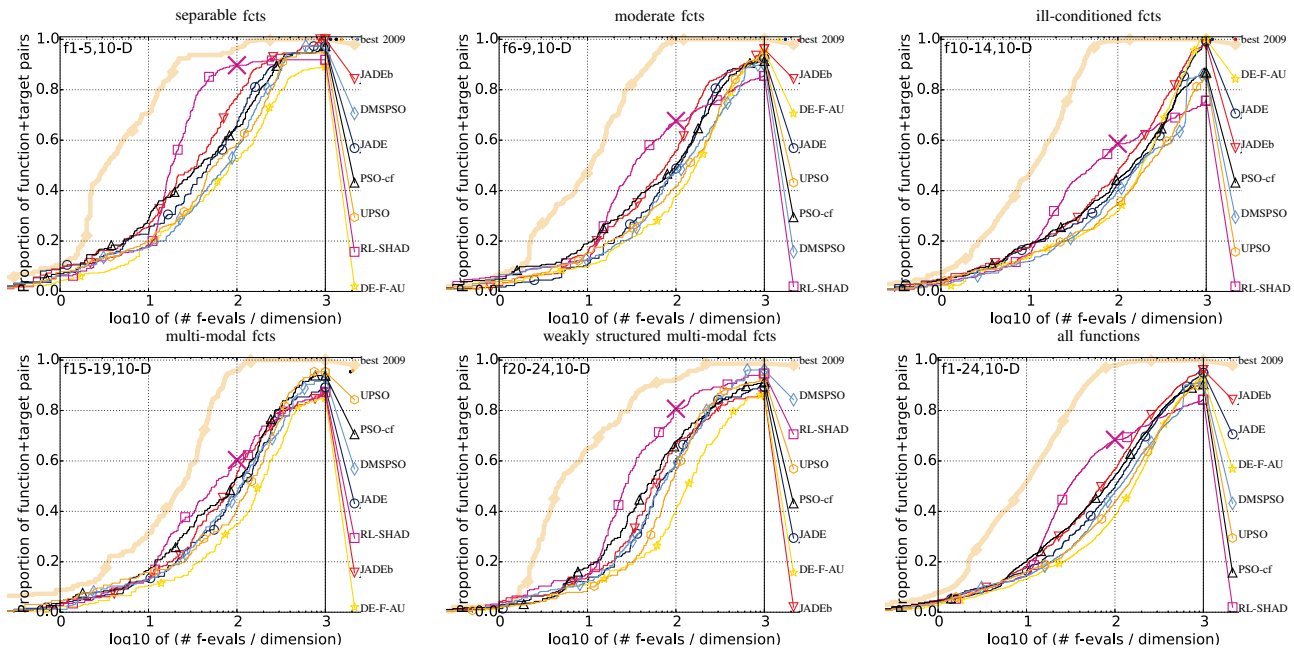
<sup>1</sup>The results of the other algorithms will be provided on the accompanying website of this paper, see Section IV



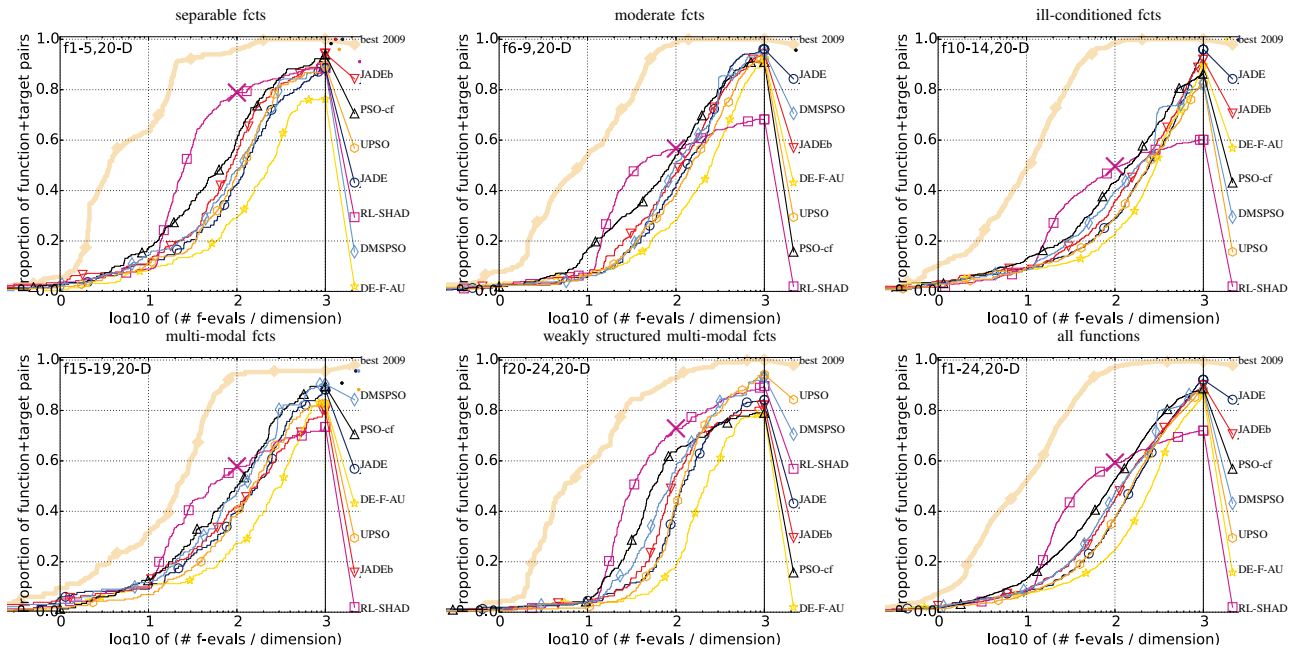
**Fig. 1:** Expected running time (ERT in number of  $f$ -evaluations as  $\log_{10}$  value) divided by dimension versus dimension. The target function value is chosen such that the bestGECCO2009 artificial algorithm just failed to achieve an ERT of  $10 \times \text{DIM}$ . Different symbols correspond to different algorithms given in the legend of  $f_1$  and  $f_{24}$ . Light symbols give the maximum number of function evaluations from the longest trial divided by dimension. Black stars indicate a statistically better result compared to all other algorithms with  $p < 0.01$  and Bonferroni correction number of dimensions (six). Legend:  $\circ$ :JADE,  $\nabla$ :JADEb,  $\star$ :DE-F-AUC,  $\square$ :RL-SHADE,  $\triangle$ :PSO-cf,  $\diamond$ :DMSPSO,  $\circ$ :UPSO



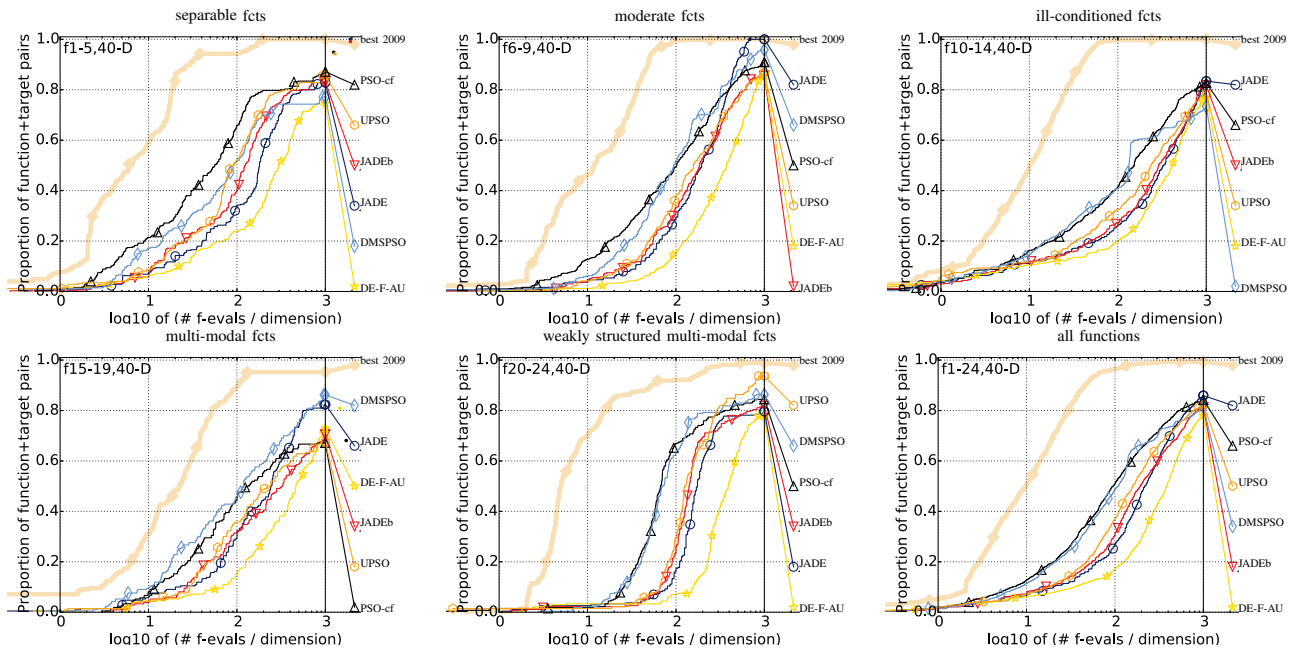
**Fig. 2:** Bootstrapped empirical cumulative distribution of the number of objective function evaluations divided by dimension (FEvals/DIM) for all functions and subgroups in 5-D. The targets are chosen from  $10^{[-8..2]}$  such that the bestGECCO2009 artificial algorithm just not reached them within a given budget of  $k \times \text{DIM}$ , with  $k \in \{0.5, 1.2, 3, 10, 50\}$ . The “best 2009” line corresponds to the best ERT observed during BBOB 2009 for each selected target.



**Fig. 3:** Bootstrapped empirical cumulative distribution of the number of objective function evaluations divided by dimension (FEvals/DIM) for all functions and subgroups in 10-D. The targets are chosen from  $10^{[-8..2]}$  such that the bestGECCO2009 artificial algorithm just not reached them within a given budget of  $k \times \text{DIM}$ , with  $k \in \{0.5, 1.2, 3, 10, 50\}$ . The “best 2009” line corresponds to the best ERT observed during BBOB 2009 for each selected target.



**Fig. 4:** Bootstrapped empirical cumulative distribution of the number of objective function evaluations divided by dimension (FEvals/DIM) for all functions and subgroups in 20-D. The targets are chosen from  $10^{[-8..2]}$  such that the bestGECCO2009 artificial algorithm just not reached them within a given budget of  $k \times \text{DIM}$ , with  $k \in \{0.5, 1.2, 3, 10, 50\}$ . The “best 2009” line corresponds to the best ERT observed during BBOB 2009 for each selected target.



**Fig. 5:** Bootstrapped empirical cumulative distribution of the number of objective function evaluations divided by dimension (FEvals/DIM) for all functions and subgroups in 40-D. The targets are chosen from  $10^{[-8..2]}$  such that the bestGECCO2009 artificial algorithm just not reached them within a given budget of  $k \times \text{DIM}$ , with  $k \in \{0.5, 1.2, 3, 10, 50\}$ . The “best 2009” line corresponds to the best ERT observed during BBOB 2009 for each selected target.





2) *PSO variants*: In general, UPSO excels relatively on multi-modal and weakly structured multi-modal functions. As the problem dimensionality increases,  $\chi$ PSO climbs the performance ladder, especially on separable functions. While DMSPSO enjoys a similar performance on multi-modal functions, it greatly suffers on separable functions with higher dimensions (e.g.,  $f_5$ , see Table III).

Overall, JADE shows a robust performance on all dimensions. Nevertheless, PSO variants appear to perform better than DE counterparts with increasing problem dimensionality.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper provides an extensive evaluation and comparison of eight DE variants and eight PSO variants on the noiseless BBOB testbed under limited number of function evaluations. Based on the results, no algorithm is suitable for all problems. Nevertheless, JADE is shown to be performing well. Moreover, the following remarks can be done:

**Algorithms Suitability:** JADE,  $\chi$ PSO, and UPSO are suitable for moderate and ill-conditioned functions, separable functions, and multi-modal functions, respectively.

**Algorithms Rectifications:** In general, *dimensionality* imposes a challenge on all DE algorithms (except perhaps for JADE). DMSPSO, being one of the top performers on multi-modal functions, should be redesigned to consider functions of linear slope (e.g.,  $f_5$ ). Tuning parameters shows a promising direction in boosting the algorithms' performance (e.g., RL-SHADE).

**Data, Code, and Future Benchmarking:** The data of these experiments will be made available on the BBOB webpage [11]. Furthermore, a repository for PSO variant codes and their data will be hosted online at <https://sites.google.com/site/psobenchmark/>.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to extend their thanks to the ATMRI:2014-R8, Singapore, for providing financial support to conduct this study.

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