

# William Thompson (Lord Kelvin)

## The Kinetic Theory of the Dissipation of Energy

Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Vol. 8, pp. 325-34 (1874)

### SUMMARY (by Stephen G. Brush, vol. 1, The Kinetic Theory of Gases)

The equations of motion in abstract dynamics are perfectly reversible; any solution of these equations remains valid when the time variable  $t$  is replaced by  $-t$ . Physical processes, on the other hand, are irreversible: for example, the friction of solids, conduction of heat, and diffusion. Nevertheless, the principle of dissipation of energy is compatible with a molecular theory in which each particle is subject to the laws of abstract dynamics.

Dissipation of energy, such as that due to heat conduction in a gas, might be entirely prevented by a suitable arrangement of Maxwell demons, operating in conformity with the conservation of energy and momentum. If no demons are present, the average result of the free motions of molecules will be to equalize temperature-differences. If we allowed this equalization to proceed for a certain time, and then reversed the motions of all the molecules, we would observe a disequalization. However, if the number of molecules is very large, as it is in a gas, any slight deviation from absolute precision in the reversal will greatly shorten the time during which disequalization occurs. In other words, the probability of occurrence of a distribution of velocities which will lead to disequalization of temperature for any perceptible length of time is very small. Furthermore, if we take account of the fact that no physical system can be completely isolated from its surroundings but is in principle interacting with all other molecules in the universe, and if we believe that the number of these latter molecules is infinite, then we may conclude that it is impossible for temperature-differences to arise spontaneously. A numerical calculation is given to illustrate this conclusion.

In abstract dynamics the instantaneous reversal of the motion of every moving particle of a system causes the system to move

backwards, each particle of it along its old path, and at the same speed as before, when again in the same position. That is to say, in mathematical language, any solution remains a solution when  $t$  is changed into  $-t$ . In physical dynamics this simple and perfect reversibility fails, on account of forces depending on friction of solids; imperfect fluidity of fluids; imperfect elasticity of solids; inequalities of temperature, and consequent conduction of heat produced by stresses in solids and fluids; imperfect magnetic retentiveness; residual electric polarization of dielectrics; generation of heat by electric currents induced by motion; diffusion of fluids, solution of solids in fluids, and other chemical changes; and absorption of radiant heat and light. Consideration of these agencies in connection with the all-pervading law of the conservation of energy proved for them by Joule, led me twenty-three years ago to the theory of the dissipation of energy, which I communicated first to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1852, in a paper entitled "On a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy."

The essence of Joule's discovery is the subjection of physical phenomena to dynamical law. If, then, the motion of every particle of matter in the universe were precisely reversed at any instant, the course of nature would be simply reversed for ever after. The bursting bubble of foam at the foot of a waterfall would reunite and descend into the water; the thermal motions would reconcentrate their energy, and throw the mass up the fall in drops re-forming into a close column of ascending water. Heat which had been generated by the friction of solids and dissipated by conduction, and radiation with absorption, would come again to the place of contact, and throw the moving body back against the force to which it had previously yielded. Boulders would recover from the mud the materials required to rebuild them into their previous jagged forms, and would become reunited to the mountain peak from which they had formerly broken away. And if also the materialistic hypothesis of life were true, living creatures would grow backwards, with conscious knowledge of the future, but no memory of the past, and would become again unborn. But the real phenomena of life infinitely transcend human science; and speculation regarding consequences of their imagined reversal is utterly unprofitable. Far otherwise, however, is it in respect to the reversal of the motions of matter uninfluenced by life, a very elementary consideration of which leads to the full explanation of the

theory of dissipation of energy.

To take one of the simplest cases of the dissipation of energy, the conduction of heat through a solid — consider a bar of metal warmer at one end than the other, and left to itself. To avoid all needless complication of taking loss or gain of heat into account, imagine the bar to be varnished with a substance impermeable to heat. For the sake of definiteness, imagine the bar to be first given with one-half of it at one uniform temperature, and the other half of it at another uniform temperature. Instantly a diffusion of heat commences, and the distribution of temperature becomes continuously less and less unequal, tending to perfect uniformity, but never in any finite time attaining perfectly to this ultimate condition. This process of diffusion could be perfectly prevented by an army of Maxwell's "intelligent demons," stationed at the surface, or interface as we may call it with Professor James Thomson, separating the hot from the cold part of the bar. To see precisely how this is to be done, consider rather a gas than a solid, because we have much knowledge regarding the molecular motions of a gas, and little or no knowledge of the molecular motions of a solid.

(The definition of a demon, according to the use of this word by Maxwell, is an intelligent being endowed with free-will and fine enough tactile and perceptive organization to give him the faculty of observing and influencing individual molecules of matter.)

Take a jar with the lower half occupied by cold air or gas, and the upper half occupied with the air or gas of the same kind, but at a higher temperature; and let the mouth of the jar be closed by an air-tight lid. If the containing vessel were perfectly impermeable to heat, the diffusion of heat would follow the same law in the gas as in the solid, though in the gas the diffusion of heat takes place chiefly by the diffusion of molecules, each taking its energy with it, and only to a small proportion of its whole amount by the interchange of energy between molecule and molecule; whereas in the solid there is little or no diffusion of substance, and the diffusion of heat takes place entirely, or almost entirely, through the communication of energy from one molecule to another. Fourier's exquisite mathematical analysis expresses perfectly the statistics of the process of diffusion in each case, whether it be "conduction of heat," as Fourier and his followers have called it, or the diffusion of substance in fluid masses (gaseous or liquid), which Fick showed to be subject to Fourier's formulas. Now, suppose the weapon of the ideal army to be a club, or, as it

were, a molecular cricket bat; and suppose, for convenience, the mass of each demon with his weapon to be several times greater than that of a molecule. Every time he strikes a molecule he is to send it away with the same energy as it had immediately before. Each demon is to keep as nearly as possible to a certain station, making only such excursions from it as the execution of his orders requires. He is to experience no forces except such as result from collisions with molecules, and mutual forces between parts of his own mass, including his weapon. Thus his voluntary movements cannot influence the position of his centre of gravity, otherwise than by producing collision with molecules

The whole interface between hot and cold is to be divided into small areas, each allotted to a single demon. The duty of each demon is to guard his allotment, turning molecules back, or allowing them to pass through from either side, according to certain definite orders. First, let the orders be to allow no molecules to pass from either side. The effect will be the same as if the interface were stopped by a barrier impermeable to matter and to heat. The pressure of the gas being by hypothesis equal in the hot and cold parts, the resultant momentum taken by each demon from any considerable number of molecules will be zero; and therefore he may so time his strokes that he shall never move to any considerable distance from his station. Now, instead of stopping and turning all the molecules from crossing his allotted area, let each demon permit a hundred molecules chosen arbitrary to cross it from the hot side; and the same number of molecules, chosen so as to have the same entire amount of energy and the same resultant momentum, to cross the other way from the cold side. Let this be done over and over again within certain small equal consecutive intervals of time, with care that if the specified balance of energy and momentum is not exactly fulfilled in respect to each successive hundred molecules crossing each way, the error will be carried forward, and as nearly as may be corrected, in respect to the next hundred. Thus, a certain perfectly regular diffusion of the gas both ways across the interface goes on, while the original different temperatures on the two sides of the interface are maintained without change.

Suppose, now, that in the original condition the temperature and pressure of the gas are each equal throughout the vessel, and let it

be required to disequalize the temperature, but to leave the pressure the same in any two portions A and B of the whole space. Station the army on the interface as previously described. Let the orders now be that each demon is to stop all molecules from crossing his area in either direction except 100 coming from A, arbitrarily chosen to be let pass into B, and a greater number, having among them less energy but equal momentum, to cross from B to A. Let this be repeated over and over again. The temperature in A will be continually diminished and the number of molecules in it continually increased, until there are not in B enough of molecules with small enough velocities to fulfil the condition with reference to permission to pass from B to A. If after that no molecule be allowed to pass the interface in either direction, the final condition will be very great condensation and very low temperature in A; rarefaction and very high temperature in B; and equal pressures in A and B. The process of disequalization of temperature and density might be stopped at any time by changing the orders to those previously specified, and so permitting a certain degree of diffusion each way across the interface while maintaining a certain uniform difference of temperatures with equality of pressure on the two sides.

If no selective influence, such as that of the ideal "demon," guides individual molecules, the average result of their free motions and collisions must be to equalize the distribution of energy among them in the gross; and after a sufficiently long time, from the supposed initial arrangement, the difference of energy in any two equal volumes, each containing a very great number of molecules, must bear a very small proportion to the whole amount in either; or, more strictly speaking, the probability of the difference of energy exceeding any stated finite proportion of the whole energy in either is very small. Suppose now the temperature to have become thus very approximately equalized at a certain time from the beginning, and let the motion of every particle become instantaneously reversed. Each molecule will retrace its former path, and at the end of a second interval of time, equal to the former, every molecule will be in the same position, and moving with the same velocity, as at the beginning; so that the given initial unequal distribution of temperature will again be found, with only the difference that each particle is moving in the direction reverse to that of its initial motion. This difference will not prevent an instantaneous subsequent

commencement of equalization, which, with entirely different paths for the individual molecules, will go on in the average according to the same law as that which took place immediately after the system was first left to itself.

By merely looking on crowds of molecules, and reckoning their energy in the gross, we could not discover that in the very special case we have just considered the progress was towards a succession of states, in which the distribution of energy deviates more and more from uniformity up to a certain time. The number of molecules being finite, it is clear that small finite deviations from absolute precision in the reversal we have supposed would not obviate the resulting disequalization of the distribution of energy. But the greater the number of molecules, the shorter will be the time during which the disequalizing will continue; and it is only when we regard the number of molecules as practically infinite that we can regard spontaneous disequalization as practically impossible. And, in point of fact, if any finite number of perfectly elastic molecules, however great, be given in motion in the interior of a perfectly rigid vessel, and be left for a sufficiently long time undisturbed except by mutual impact and collisions against the sides of the containing vessel, it must happen over and over again that (for example) something more than 9/10ths of the whole energy shall be in one-half of the vessel, and less than 1/10th of the whole energy in the other half. But if the number of molecules be very great, this will happen enormously less frequently than that something more than 6/10ths shall be in one-half, and something less than 4/10ths in the other. Taking as unit of time the average interval of free motion between consecutive collisions, it is easily seen that the probability of these being something more than any stated percentage of excess above the half of the energy in one-half of the vessel during the unit of time from a stated instant, is smaller the greater the dimensions of the vessel and the greater the stated percentage. It is a strange but nevertheless a true conception of the old well-known law of the conduction of heat, to say that it is very improbable that in the course of 1000 years one-half of the bar of iron shall of itself become warmer by a degree than the other half; and that the probability of this happening before 1,000,000 years pass is 1000 times as great as that it will happen in the course of 1000 years, and that it certainly will happen in the course of some very long time. But let it be remembered that we have supposed the

bar to be covered with an impermeable varnish. Do away with this impossible ideal, and believe the number of molecules in the universe to be infinite; then we may say one-half of the bar will never become warmer than the other, except by the agency of external sources of heat or cold. This one instance suffices to explain the philosophy of the foundation on which the theory of the dissipation of energy rests.

Take, however, another case, in which the probability may be readily calculated. Let an hermetically sealed glass jar of air contain 2,000,000,000,000 molecules of oxygen, and 8,000,000,000,000 molecules of nitrogen. If examined any time in the infinitely distant future, what is the number of chances against one that all the molecules of oxygen and none of nitrogen shall be found in one stated part of the vessel equal in volume to 1/5th of the whole? The number expressing the answer in the Arabic notation has about 2,173,220,000,000 of places of whole numbers. On the other hand, the chance against there being exactly 2/10ths of the whole number of particles of nitrogen, and at the same time exactly 2/10ths of the whole number of particles of oxygen in the first specified part of the vessel, is only  $4021 \times 10^9$  to 1