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'Maxwell's Demon' traps molecules as they move naturally

150-year-old idea inspires nanomachine

# By Patricia Reaney REUTERS

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LONDON - Nearly 150 years ago it was no more than a concept by a visionary scientist, but researchers have now created a minuscule motor that could lead to the creation of microscopic nanomachines.

Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell first imagined an atom-size device dubbed Maxwell's Demon in 1867. Scientists at the University of Edinburgh have made it a reality.

"We have a new motor mechanism for a nanomachine," said David Leigh, a professor of chemistry at the University.

Story continues below !



A nanomachine is an incredibly tiny device whose parts consist of single molecules. Nature uses nanomachines for everything from



This fanciful illustration shows the idea behind "Maxwell's Demon," a molecular machine conceived by James Clerk Maxwell in 1867. The atomscale device captures molecular rings as they move from one compartment to another. Molecules check in, but they don't check out.

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photosynthesis to moving muscles in the body and transferring information through cells.

Scientists are trying to unravel the secrets of nanomachines and nanotechnology, which works on a tiny scale. One nanometer is a billionth of a meter, or about 80,000 times smaller than the thickness of a human hair.

"Molecular machines allow life itself to occur at a molecular level. Our new motor mechanism is a small step towards doing that sort of thing with artificial molecular machines," Leigh told Reuters.

His mechanism traps molecular-sized particles as they move. As Maxwell had predicted long ago, it does not need energy because it is powered by light.

"While light has previously been used to energize tiny particles directly, this is the first time that a system has been devised to trap molecules as they move in a certain direction under their natural motion," said Leigh, who reported the findings in Thursday's issue of the journal Nature. "Once the molecules are trapped, they cannot escape.

Leigh credits Maxwell for establishing the fundamentals for

In an earlier study, he and his team showed that a nanomachine

The new motor mechanism will enable scientists to do things that are

could move a droplet of water uphill by using molecular force. Although the movement was small, it was a big step in learning to

understanding how light, heat and molecules behave.

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Nanotechnology is already being used in cosmetics, computer chips, sunscreens, self-cleaning windows and stain-resistant clothing.

Leigh believes nanoscale science and engineering could have a huge impact on society - comparable to the impact of electricity, the

But quite how, is difficult to predict.

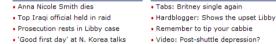
steam engine and the Internet.

"It a bit like when stone-age man made his wheel asking him to predict the motorway," he said.

"It is a machine mechanism that is going to take molecular machines a step forward to the realization of the future world of nanotechnology. Things that seem like a Harry Potter film now are going to be a reality.

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