

PHYSICS

Absolute Temperature

"A Classic of Science"

The Thermometer Scale Based on the Laws of Heat, and The "Absolute Zero" Point, at Which Motion Ceases

ON AN ABSOLUTE THERMOMETRIC SCALE FOUNDED ON CARNOT'S THEORY OF THE MOTIVE POWER OF HEAT, AND CALCULATED FROM REGNAULT'S OBSERVATIONS. By William Thomson, Baron Kelvin. Published in Cambridge Philosophical Society Proceedings, June 5, 1848; and Phil. Mag., Oct. 1848. Republished in Mathematical and Physical Papers by Sir William Thomson, Vol. I. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1882. This is an exact reprint of extracts from the original publication.

THE DETERMINATION of temperature has long been recognized as a problem of the greatest importance in physical science. It has accordingly been made a subject of most careful attention, and, especially in late years, of very elaborate and refined experimental researches; and we are thus at present in possession of as complete a practical solution of the problem as can be desired, even for the most accurate investigations. The theory of thermometry is however as yet far from being in so satisfactory a state. The principle to be followed in constructing a thermometric scale might at first sight seem to be obvious, as it might appear that a perfect thermometer would indicate equal additions of heat, as corresponding to equal elevations of temperature, estimated by the numbered divisions of its scale. It is however now recognized (from the variations in the specific heats of bodies) as an experimentally demonstrated fact that thermometry under this condition is impossible, and we are left without any principle on which to found an absolute thermometric scale.

Next in importance to the primary establishment of an absolute scale, in-

This paper was written after Joule had astonished British scientists with his paper "On the Mechanical Equivalent of Heat," but William Thomson was not yet entirely converted to his friend's unorthodox views. Joule's paper will appear soon as a Classic of Science.

dependently of the properties of any particular kind of matter, is the fixing upon an arbitrary system of thermometry, according to which results of observations made by different experimenters, in various positions and circumstances, may be exactly compared. This object is very fully attained by means of thermometers constructed and graduated according to the clearly defined methods adopted by the best instrument-makers of the present day, when the rigorous experimental processes which have been indicated, especially by Regnault, for interpreting their indications in a comparable way, are followed. The particular kind of thermometer which is least liable to uncertain variations of any kind is that founded on the expansion of air, and this is therefore generally adopted as the standard for the comparison of thermometers of all constructions. Hence the scale which is at present employed for estimating temperature is that of the air-thermometer; and in accurate researches care is always taken to reduce to this scale the indications of the instrument actually used, whatever may be its specific construction and graduation.

The principle according to which the scale of the air thermometer is graduated, is simply that equal absolute expansions of the mass of air or gas in the instrument, under a constant pressure, shall indicate equal differences of the numbers on the scale; the length of a "degree" being determined by allowing a given number for the interval between the freezing- and the boiling-points. Now it is found by Regnault that various thermometers, constructed with air under different pressures, or with different gases, give indications which coincide so closely, that, unless when certain gases, such as sulphurous acid, which approach the physical condition of vapors at saturation, are made use of, the variations are inappreciable. This remarkable circumstance enhances very

much the practical value of the air-thermometer; but still a rigorous standard can only be defined by fixing upon a certain gas at a determinate pressure, as the thermometric substance. Although we have thus a strict principle for constructing a definite system for the estimation of temperature, yet as reference is essentially made to a specific body as the standard thermometric substance, we cannot consider that we have arrived at an absolute scale, and we can only regard, in strictness, the scale actually adopted as an arbitrary series of numbered points of reference sufficiently close for the requirement of practical thermometry.

In the present state of physical science, therefore, a question of extreme interest arises: *Is there any principle on which an absolute thermometric scale can be founded?* It appears to me that Carnot's theory of the motive power of heat enables us to give an affirmative answer.

The relation between motive power and heat, as established by Carnot, is such that quantities of heat, and intervals of temperature, are involved as the sole elements in the expression for the amount of mechanical effect to be obtained through the agency of heat; and since we have, independently, a definite system for the measurement of quantities of heat, we are thus furnished with a measure for intervals according to which absolute differences of temperature may be estimated. To make this intelligible, a few words in explanation of Carnot's theory must be given; but for a full account of this most valuable contribution to physical science, the reader is referred to either of the works mentioned above (the original treatise by Carnot, and Clapeyron's paper on the same subject.)

In the present state of science no operation is known by which heat can be absorbed, without either elevating the temperature of matter, or becoming latent and producing some alteration in the physical condition of the body into which it is absorbed; and the conversion of heat (or caloric) into mechanical

effect is probably impossible,¹ certainly undiscovered. In actual engines for obtaining mechanical effect through the agency of heat, we must consequently look for the source or power, not in any absorption and conversion, but merely in a transmission of heat. Now Carnot, starting from universally acknowledged physical principles, demonstrates that it is by the *letting down* of heat from a hot body to a cold body, through the medium of an engine (a steam-engine, or an air-engine for instance), that mechanical effect is to be obtained; and conversely, he proves that the same amount of heat may, by the expenditure of an equal amount of labouring force, be *raised* from the cold to the hot body (the engine being in this case *worked backwards*); just as mechanical effect may be obtained by the descent of water let down by a water-wheel, and by spending labouring force in turning the wheel backwards, or in working a pump, water may be elevated to a higher level. The amount of mechanical effect to be obtained by the transmission of a given quantity of heat, through the medium of any kind of engine in which the economy is perfect, will depend, as Carnot demonstrates, not on the specific nature of the substance employed as the medium of transmission of heat in the engine, but solely on the interval between the temperature of the two bodies between which the heat is transferred.

Carnot examines in detail the ideal construction of an air-engine and of a steam-engine, in which, besides the condition of perfect economy being satis-

¹This opinion seems to be nearly universally held by those who have written on the subject. A contrary opinion however has been advocated by Mr. Joule of Manchester; some very remarkable discoveries which he has made with reference to the *generation* of heat by the friction of fluids in motion, and some known experiments with magneto-electric machines, seeming to indicate an actual conversion of mechanical effect into caloric. No experiment however is adduced in which the converse operation is exhibited; but it must be confessed that as yet much is involved in mystery with reference to these fundamental questions of natural philosophy.

Red Globuls in the Blood

LEEUWENHOEK, who was born three hundred years ago, was one of the earliest possessors of a microscope. With it he discovered red globuls in the blood, which he describes in

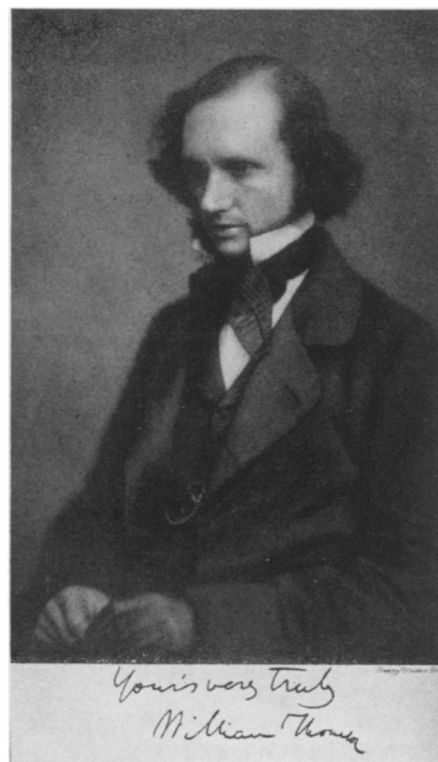
THE NEXT CLASSIC OF SCIENCE

fied, the machine is so arranged, that at the close of a complete operation the substance (air in one case and water in the other) employed is restored to precisely the same physical condition as at the commencement. He thus shews on what elements, capable of experimental determination, either with reference to air, or with reference to a liquid and its vapour, the absolute amount of mechanical effect due to the transmission of a unit of heat from a hot body to a cold body, through any given interval of the thermometric scale, may be ascertained. In M. Clapeyron's paper various experimental data, confessedly very imperfect, are brought forward, and the amounts of mechanical effect due to a unit of heat descending a degree of the air-thermometer, in various parts of the scale, are calculated from them, according to Carnot's expressions. The results so obtained indicate very decidedly, that what we may with much propriety call *the value of a degree* (estimated by the mechanical effect to be obtained from the descent of a unit of heat through it) of the air-thermometer depends on the part of the scale in which it is taken, being less for high than for low temperatures.²

The characteristic property of the scale which I now propose is, that all degrees have the same value; that is, that a unit of heat descending from a body *A* at the temperature T° of this scale, to a body *B* at the temperature $(T-1)^{\circ}$, would give out the same mechanical effect, whatever be the number *T*. This may justly be termed an absolute scale, since its characteristic is quite independent of the physical properties of any specific substance.

To compare this scale with that of the air-thermometer, the *values* (according to the principles of estimation stated above) of degrees of the air-thermometer must be known. Now an expression, obtained by Carnot from the consideration of his ideal steam-engine, enables us to calculate these values, when the latent heat of a given volume and the pressure of saturated vapour at any temperature are experimentally determined. The determination of these elements is the principal object of Reg-

²This is what we might anticipate, when we reflect that infinite cold must correspond to a finite number of degrees of the air-thermometer below zero; since, if we push the strict principle of graduation, stated above, sufficiently far, we should arrive at a point corresponding to the volume of air being reduced to nothing, which would be marked as -273° of the scale ($-100/366$, it $.366$ be the coefficient of expansion); and therefore -273° of the air-thermometer is a point which cannot be reached at any finite temperature, however low.



WILLIAM THOMSON

—as a young man of 28, four years after this epoch-making paper was published. It was not until 1892, when he was 68 years old, that he was made Baron Kelvin of Largs, with the title "Lord Kelvin"

nault's great work, already referred to, but at present his researches are not complete.

The labour of performing the necessary calculations for effecting a comparison of the proposed scale with that of the air-thermometer, between the limits 0° and 230° of the latter, has been kindly undertaken by Mr. William Steele, lately of Glasgow College, now of St. Peter's College, Cambridge. His results in tabulated forms were laid before the Society, with a diagram, in which the comparison between the two scales is represented graphically. In the first table, the amounts of mechanical effect due to the descent of a unit of heat through the successive degrees of the air-thermometer are exhibited. The unit of heat adopted is the quantity necessary to elevate the temperature of a kilogramme of water from 0° to 1° of the air-thermometer; and the unit of mechanical effect is a metre-kilogramme; that is, a kilogramme raised a metre high.

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