Students’ Reasoning Regarding Entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics in an Upper-Level Thermal Physics Course

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Ames, Iowa

Supported in part by NSF DUE #9981140 and PHY-#0406724
Background

• Previous research on learning of thermal physics:
  – algebra-based introductory physics
    (Loverude, Kautz, and Heron, 2002)
  – sophomore-level thermal physics
    (Loverude, Kautz, and Heron, 2002)
  – calculus-based introductory physics (Meltzer, 2004)

• This project:
  – research and curriculum development for upper-level
    (junior-senior) thermal physics course
Research on the Teaching and Learning of Thermal Physics

Funded by Physics Division of NSF

- Investigate student learning of statistical thermodynamics
- Probe evolution of students’ thinking from introductory through advanced-level course
- Develop research-based curricular materials

In collaboration with John Thompson, University of Maine
Course and Students

• **Topics:** Approximately equal balance between classical macroscopic thermodynamics, and statistical thermodynamics *(Texts: Sears and Salinger; Schroeder)*

• **Students enrolled, 2004** *(N_{initial} = 20):*
  – all but three were physics majors or physics/engineering double majors
  – all but one were juniors or above
  – all had studied thermodynamics

*Course taught by DEM using lecture + interactive-engagement*
Performance Comparison: Upper-level vs. Introductory Students

• Diagnostic questions given to students in introductory calculus-based course after instruction was complete:
  – 1999-2001: 653 students responded to written questions
  – 2002: 32 self-selected, high-performing students participated in one-on-one interviews

• Written pre-test questions given to Thermal Physics students on first day of class

[Intro course data: DEM, Am. J. Phys. 72, 1432 (2004)]
Responses to Question Requiring Use of First Law of Thermodynamics
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1999-2001, 2002, and 2004 refer to different years or samples in the study. The Correct column shows the percentage of correct responses in each case.
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Performance of upper-level students significantly better ($p < 0.01$) than introductory students in *written* sample
Heat Engines and Second-Law Issues

• After extensive study and review of first law of thermodynamics, cyclic processes, Carnot heat engines, efficiencies, etc., students were given pretest regarding various possible (or impossible) versions of two-temperature heat engines.
Consider a system composed of a fixed quantity of gas (not necessarily ideal) that undergoes a cyclic process in which the final state is the same as the initial state.
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During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$

...
Consider a system composed of a fixed quantity of gas (not necessarily ideal) that undergoes a cyclic process in which the final state is the same as the initial state.

During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$

... 

For the following processes, state whether they are possible according to the laws of thermodynamics. Justify your reasoning for each question:
heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$
heat transfer of 60 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$
net work of 20 J done by the system on its surroundings.

(diagram not given)

(violation of first law of thermodynamics)

71% correct ($N = 17$)
heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$
heat transfer of 60 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$
net work of 20 J done by the system on its surroundings.
heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$
heat transfer of 0 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$
net work of 100 J done by the system on its surroundings.
heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$
heat transfer of 0 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$
net work of 100 J done by the system on its surroundings.

(Part of the diagram is not given)

(Perfect heat engine: violation of second law of thermodynamics)

59% correct ($N = 17$)
During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: \( T_{\text{high}} \) and \( T_{\text{low}} \).
During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$. Assume that this process is reversible, that is, the process could be reversed by an infinitesimal change in the system properties.
During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$. Assume that this process is reversible, that is, the process could be reversed by an infinitesimal change in the system properties. Let’s also assume that this process has the following properties (where we have specified some particular values for $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$ such that this process will actually be able to occur):

- heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$
- heat transfer of 60 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$
- net work of 40 J done by the system on its surroundings.
During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: \( T_{\text{high}} \) and \( T_{\text{low}} \). Assume that this process is *reversible*, that is, the process could be reversed by an infinitesimal change in the system properties. Let’s also assume that this process has the following properties (where we have specified some particular values for \( T_{\text{high}} \) and \( T_{\text{low}} \) such that this process will actually be able to occur):

- Heat transfer of 100 J to the system at \( T_{\text{high}} \)
- Heat transfer of 60 J away from the system at \( T_{\text{low}} \)
- Net work of 40 J done by the system on its surroundings.

\[
\eta_{\text{reversible}} = \frac{W}{Q_{\text{in}}} = \frac{40}{100} = 0.40 = \eta_{\text{max}}
\]

\text{Not given}
During one particular cyclic process, there is heat transfer to or from the system at only two fixed temperatures: $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$. Assume that this process is reversible, that is, the process could be reversed by an infinitesimal change in the system properties. Let’s also assume that this process has the following properties (where we have specified some particular values for $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$ such that this process will actually be able to occur):

- heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$
- heat transfer of 60 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$
- net work of 40 J done by the system on its surroundings.

\[ \Rightarrow \eta_{\text{reversible}} = \frac{W}{Q_{\text{in}}} = \frac{40}{100} = 0.40 = \eta_{\text{max}} \]

\text{Not given}
Now consider a set of processes in which $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$ have exactly the same numerical values as in the example above, but these processes are not necessarily reversible.
Now consider a set of processes in which $T_{\text{high}}$ and $T_{\text{low}}$ have exactly the same numerical values as in the example above, but these processes are not necessarily reversible. For the following process, state whether it is possible according to the laws of thermodynamics. Justify your reasoning for each question.
heat transfer of 100 J to the system at $T_{\text{high}}$

heat transfer of 40 J away from the system at $T_{\text{low}}$

net work of 60 J done by the system on its surroundings.

$T_{\text{high}}$  

$T_{\text{low}}$

$Q = 100 \ J$  

$Q = 40 \ J$  

$W_{\text{NET}} = 60 \ J$  

$\Rightarrow \eta_{\text{process}} = \frac{W}{Q_{\text{in}}} = \frac{60}{100} = 0.60 > \eta_{\text{reversible}}$ (violation of second law)

0% correct ($N = 15$)

Consistent with results reported by M. Cochran (2002)
Heat Engines: Post-Instruction

• Following extensive instruction on second-law and implications regarding heat engines, graded quiz given as post-test
Consider the following cyclic processes which are being evaluated for possible use as heat engines.
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For each process, there is heat transfer to the system at $T = 400$ K, and heat transfer away from the system at $T = 100$ K. There is no heat transfer at any other temperatures.
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For each process, there is heat transfer to the system at $T = 400$ K, and heat transfer away from the system at $T = 100$ K. There is no heat transfer at any other temperatures.

For each cyclic process, answer the following questions: Is the process a *reversible* process, a process that is *possible but irreversible*, or a process that is *impossible*? Explain. (You might want to consider efficiencies.)
Consider the following cyclic processes which are being evaluated for possible use as heat engines.

For each process, there is heat transfer to the system at $T = 400$ K, and heat transfer away from the system at $T = 100$ K. There is no heat transfer at any other temperatures.

For each cyclic process, answer the following questions: Is the process a reversible process, a process that is possible but irreversible, or a process that is impossible? Explain. (You might want to consider efficiencies.)

\[
\eta_{\text{Carnot}} = 1 - \frac{T_{\text{low}}}{T_{\text{high}}} = 1 - \frac{100}{400} = 0.75 = \eta_{\text{reversible}} = \eta_{\text{max}}
\]

Not given
Cycle 1:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

Cycle 2:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 60 J

Cycle 3:
heat transfer at high temperature is 200 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 50 J
Cycle 1:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

Cycle 2:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 60 J

Cycle 3:
heat transfer at high temperature is 200 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 50 J
Cycle 2:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 60 J
Cycle 2:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 60 J

\[ \eta_{\text{process}} = \frac{W}{Q_{\text{in}}} \]

\[ \eta_{\text{process}} = \frac{W}{Q_{\text{in}}} = \frac{Q_{\text{in}} - |Q_{\text{out}}|}{Q_{\text{in}}} = 1 - \frac{|Q_{\text{out}}|}{Q_{\text{in}}} \]

\[ = 1 - \frac{|Q_{\text{low-T}}|}{Q_{\text{high-T}}} \]
Cycle 2:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 60 J

\[ \eta_{\text{process}} = 1 - \frac{|Q_{\text{low}-T}|}{Q_{\text{high}-T}} = 1 - \frac{60}{300} = 0.80 > \eta_{\text{reversible}} = \eta_{\text{max}} \]

Process is impossible

60% correct with correct explanation \((N = 15)\)
Cycle 1:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

Cycle 2:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 60 J

Cycle 3:
heat transfer at high temperature is 200 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 50 J
Cycle 1:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

\[ \eta_{\text{process}} = 1 - \frac{|Q_{\text{low}-T}|}{Q_{\text{high}-T}} = 1 - \frac{100}{300} = 0.67 < \eta_{\text{reversible}} = \eta_{\text{max}} \]

Process is possible but irreversible

53% correct with correct explanation \((N = 15)\)
**Cycle 1:**
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

At the end of the process, is the entropy of the system larger than, smaller than, or equal to its value at the beginning of the process?
Cycle 1:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

At the end of the process, is the entropy of the system larger than, smaller than, or equal to its value at the beginning of the process?

Answer: $\Delta S_{\text{system}} = 0$ since process is cyclic, and $S$ is a state function

40% correct with correct explanation ($N = 15$)
Cycle 1:
heat transfer at high temperature is 300 J;
heat transfer at low temperature is 100 J

At the end of the process, is the entropy of the system larger than, smaller than, or equal to its value at the beginning of the process?

Most common error: Assume $\Delta S_{\text{system}} = \sum_i \frac{Q_i}{T_i}$

(forgetting that this equation requires $Q_{\text{reversible}}$ and this is not a reversible process)
3. For each of the following questions consider a system undergoing a naturally occurring ("spontaneous") process. The system can exchange energy with its surroundings.

A. During this process, does the entropy of the system \( S_{\text{system}} \) increase, decrease, or remain the same, or is this not determinable with the given information? Explain your answer.

B. During this process, does the entropy of the surroundings \( S_{\text{surroundings}} \) increase, decrease, or remain the same, or is this not determinable with the given information? Explain your answer.

C. During this process, does the entropy of the system plus the entropy of the surroundings \( S_{\text{system}} + S_{\text{surroundings}} \) increase, decrease, or remain the same, or is this not determinable with the given information? Explain your answer.
Responses to Spontaneous Process Question

<table>
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<tr>
<th>[Correct Responses]</th>
<th>2004 Introductory Physics (Pretest) (N=289)</th>
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<tr>
<td>( S_{\text{system}} )</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>( S_{\text{surroundings}} )</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>( S_{\text{total}} )</td>
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Table showing the percentage of correct responses in different physics courses and their respective post-tests and interviews.
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Summary

• Difficulties with fundamental concepts found among introductory physics students persist for many students beginning upper-level thermal physics course.

• Intensive study incorporating active-learning methods yields only slow progress for many students.