

Internal Energy: A Fundamental Concept in Thermodynamics and Energy Systems

Daniel Mwangi*

Department of Applied Physics and Materials Science, Nairobi Institute of Technology, Nairobi, Kenya

Mini Review

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***For Correspondence**

Daniel Mwangi, Department of Applied Physics and Materials Science, Nairobi Institute of Technology, Nairobi, Kenya

E-mail: d.mwangi@appliedphysics.ac.ke

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ABSTRACT

Internal energy is a core concept in thermodynamics that represents the total energy contained within a system due to the microscopic motion and interactions of its constituent particles. It encompasses various forms of energy, including kinetic energy from molecular motion and potential energy from intermolecular forces and chemical bonds. Understanding internal energy is essential for analyzing thermodynamic processes such as heat transfer, work, and energy conversion. The change in internal energy is governed by the first law of thermodynamics, which establishes the relationship between heat, work, and energy conservation. Internal energy plays a critical role in physical, chemical, and biological systems, influencing phase transitions, chemical reactions, and material properties. It is also fundamental to engineering applications such as engines, refrigeration systems, and power plants. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of internal energy, including its definition, historical background, theoretical foundations, mathematical representation, practical applications, and significance in modern science and technology. By integrating conceptual understanding with real-world relevance, the study of internal energy contributes to advancements in energy efficiency, sustainability, and technological innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Energy is a central concept in physics and plays a crucial role in understanding the behavior of physical systems. Among the various forms of energy, internal energy is particularly significant in thermodynamics, as it describes the energy contained within a system at the microscopic level. Unlike mechanical energy, which is associated with the motion and position of objects as a whole, internal energy arises from the random motion and interactions of molecules and atoms.

Internal energy is not directly observable but can be inferred through measurable quantities such as temperature, pressure, and volume. It is a state function, meaning its value depends only on the current state of the system and not on the path taken to reach that state. This property makes it extremely useful in analyzing thermodynamic processes.

The concept of internal energy is essential in understanding heat transfer, work, and the efficiency of energy systems. It also provides a framework for studying chemical reactions, phase changes, and biological processes. This article aims to provide a detailed understanding of internal energy, covering its theoretical basis, mathematical formulation, and practical applications.

Background and Historical Development

The concept of internal energy evolved gradually as scientists sought to understand heat and energy. In the early days, heat was believed to be a fluid-like substance called "caloric." However, this theory was challenged by experiments in the 18th and 19th centuries.

One of the key figures in the development of thermodynamics was James Prescott Joule, who demonstrated that heat is a form of energy. His experiments showed that mechanical work could be converted into heat, leading to the principle of energy conservation. This discovery laid the foundation for the concept of internal energy.

Later, scientists such as Rudolf Clausius and William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) formalized the laws of thermodynamics. Clausius

introduced the concept of internal energy as a property of a system, while Kelvin contributed to the understanding of temperature and energy relationships.

The development of statistical mechanics in the late 19th century provided a deeper understanding of internal energy at the molecular level. Scientists like Ludwig Boltzmann and James Clerk Maxwell explained how the motion and interactions of particles contribute to the total energy of a system.

Concept and Definition of Internal Energy

Internal energy, denoted by U , is defined as the total energy contained within a system due to the motion and interactions of its particles. It includes:

Kinetic energy of molecules (translational, rotational, and vibrational motion)

Potential energy due to intermolecular forces

Chemical energy stored in bonds

Nuclear energy (in certain cases)

Mathematically, internal energy can be expressed as:

$$U = KE + PE$$

Where:

KE represents the total kinetic energy of particles

PE represents the total potential energy

Internal energy is a state function, meaning its change depends only on the initial and final states of the system.

Types of Internal Energy

Internal energy can be categorized into different forms based on its origin:

1. Kinetic Internal Energy

This arises from the motion of particles:

Translational motion (movement in space)

Rotational motion (spinning of molecules)

Vibrational motion (oscillation of atoms within molecules)

2. Potential Internal Energy

This is due to forces between particles:

Intermolecular forces (van der Waals forces, hydrogen bonding)

Electrostatic interactions

3. Chemical Energy

Stored in chemical bonds and released during chemical reactions.

4. Nuclear Energy

Energy stored in atomic nuclei, significant in nuclear reactions.

Internal Energy and the First Law of Thermodynamics

The first law of thermodynamics relates internal energy to heat and work:

$$\Delta U = Q - W$$

Where:

ΔU = change in internal energy

Q = heat added to the system

W = work done by the system

This equation expresses the principle of energy conservation.

1. Interpretation

If heat is added ($Q>0$), internal energy increases.

If work is done by the system ($W>0$), internal energy decreases.

Internal Energy in Different Thermodynamic Processes

1. Isothermal Process

Temperature remains constant.

Internal energy does not change for ideal gases.

2. Adiabatic Process

No heat exchange ($Q=0$).

Change in internal energy equals work done.

3. Isochoric Process

Volume remains constant.

No work is done, so $\Delta U=Q$.

4. Isobaric Process

Pressure remains constant.

Internal energy changes due to both heat and work.

Measurement and Calculation of Internal Energy

Internal energy cannot be measured directly but can be calculated using thermodynamic equations and experimental data.

1. Calorimetry

Measures heat exchange to determine changes in internal energy.

2. Ideal Gas Model

For an ideal gas:

$$U=3/2nRT$$

Where:

n = number of moles

R = gas constant

T = temperature

Applications of Internal Energy

1. Engineering Systems

Used in designing engines, turbines, and power plants.

Determines efficiency of energy conversion systems.

2. Chemical Reactions

Helps predict whether reactions are exothermic or endothermic.

3. Phase Changes

Explains melting, boiling, and condensation processes.

4. Biological Systems

Cellular metabolism involves changes in internal energy.

DISCUSSION

Internal energy is a fundamental concept that bridges microscopic particle behavior and macroscopic thermodynamic properties. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how energy is stored and transferred within systems.

One of the most important aspects of internal energy is its role in energy conservation. The first law of thermodynamics ensures that energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed. This principle has profound implications for science and engineering,

guiding the design of efficient energy systems.

The study of internal energy also highlights the importance of molecular interactions. For example, the difference in internal energy between solids, liquids, and gases explains their distinct properties. In gases, particles move freely, resulting in higher kinetic energy, while in solids, particles are closely packed, leading to significant potential energy.

In modern science, internal energy is closely linked with entropy and the second law of thermodynamics. Together, these concepts describe the direction of energy flow and the efficiency of processes. Advances in statistical mechanics and quantum theory have further deepened our understanding of internal energy at the atomic level.

However, challenges remain in accurately modeling internal energy in complex systems, such as biological organisms and advanced materials. Continued research is essential to improve our understanding and application of this concept.

Advantages and Limitations

Advantages

Provides a complete description of energy within a system

Essential for analyzing thermodynamic processes

Applicable to a wide range of scientific and engineering fields

Limitations

Cannot be measured directly

Complex to calculate for real systems

Requires simplifying assumptions (e.g., ideal gas behavior)

Future Perspectives

The concept of internal energy continues to evolve with advancements in science and technology:

Development of renewable energy systems

Improved energy storage technologies

Applications in nanotechnology and materials science

Integration with quantum thermodynamics

Understanding internal energy is crucial for addressing global challenges such as energy sustainability and climate change.

CONCLUSION

Internal energy is a fundamental concept in thermodynamics that describes the total energy contained within a system due to the motion and interactions of its particles. It plays a vital role in understanding heat transfer, work, and energy conservation. Through the first law of thermodynamics, internal energy provides a framework for analyzing physical and chemical processes.

From its historical development to modern applications, internal energy remains a cornerstone of scientific understanding. Its relevance extends across physics, chemistry, engineering, and biology, making it essential for both theoretical studies and practical applications. As technology advances, the study of internal energy will continue to contribute to innovations in energy systems, sustainability, and scientific discovery.

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