

SECOND-GENERATION NANOTECHNOLOGY

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Nowadays protein universal technological material thing remains in the past because that have technical shortcomings. Protein machines quit when dried, freeze when chilled, and cook when heated. Over the centuries, we have learned to use our hands of flesh and bone to build machines of wood, ceramic, steel, and plastic. We will do likewise in the future. We will use protein machines to build nanomachines of tougher stuff than protein.

As nanotechnology moves beyond reliance on proteins, it will grow more ordinary from an engineer's point of view. Molecule* will be assembled like the components of an erector set, and well-bonded parts will stay put. Just as ordinary tools can build ordinary machines from parts, so molecular tools will bond molecules together to make tiny gears, motors, levers, and casings and assemble them to make complex machines.

How will these better machines be built? Over the years, engineers have used technology to improve technology. They have used *metal tools to* shape metal into better tools, and computers to design and program better computers. They will likewise use protein nanomachines to build better nanomachines. Enzymes show the way: they assemble large molecules by "grabbing" small molecules from the water around them, then holding them together so that a bond forms. Enzymes assemble DNA, RNA, proteins, fats, hormones, and chlorophyll in this way - indeed, virtually the whole range of molecules found in living tilings.

Biochemical engineers, then, will construct new enzymes to assemble new patterns of atoms. For example, they might make an enzyme-like machine which will add carbon atoms to a small spot, layer on layer. If bonded correctly, the atoms will build up to form a fine, flexible diamond fiber having over fifty times as much strength as the same weight of aluminum. Aerospace companies will line up to buy such fibers by the ton to make advanced composites. (This shows one small reason why military competition will drive molecular technology forward, as it has driven so many fields in the past.)

But the great advance will come when protein machines are able to make structures more complex than mere fibers. These programmable protein machines will resemble ribosomes programmed by RNA, or the older generation of automated machine tools programmed by punched tapes. They will open a new world of possibilities, letting *engineers* escape the limitations of proteins to build rugged, compact machines with straightforward designs.

Universal Assemblers

These second-generation nanomachines - built of more than just proteins - will do all that proteins can do, and more. In particular, some will serve as improved devices for assembling molecular structures. Able to tolerate acid or vacuum, freezing or baking, depending on design, enzyme-like second-generation machines will be able to use as "tools" almost any of the reactive molecules used by chemists - but they will wield them with the precision of programmed machines. They will be able to bond atoms together in virtually any stable pattern, adding a few at a time to the surface of a work piece until a complex structure is complete. Think of such nanomachines as assemblers.

Because assemblers will let us place atoms in almost any reasonable arrangement, they will let us build almost anything that the laws of nature allow to exist. In particular, they will let us build almost anything we can design -including more assemblers. The consequences of this will be profound, because our crude tools have let us explore only a small part of the range of possibilities that natural law permits. Assemblers will open a world of new technologies.

Advances in the technologies of medicine, space, computation, and production - and warfare – all depend on our ability to arrange atoms. With assemblers, we will be able to remake our world or destroy it. So at this point it seems wise to step back and look at the prospect as clearly as we can, so we can be sure that assemblers and nanotechnology are not a mere futurological mirage.

Nanocomputers

Assemblers will bring one breakthrough of obvious and basic importance: engineers will use them to shrink the size and cost of computer circuits and speed their operation by enormous factors.

With today's bulk technology, engineers make patterns on silicon chips by throwing atoms and photons at them, but the patterns remain flat and molecular-scale flaws are unavoidable. With assemblers, however, engineers will build circuits in three dimensions, and build to atomic precision. The exact limits of electronic technology today remain uncertain because the quantum behavior of electrons in complex networks of tiny structures presents complex problems, some of them resulting directly from the uncertainty principle. Whatever the limits are, though, they will be reached with the help of assemblers.

The fastest computers will use electronic effects, but the smallest may not. This may seem odd, yet the essence of computation has nothing to do with electronics. A digital computer is a collection of switches able to turn one another on and off. Its switches start in one pattern (perhaps representing $2 + 2$), then switch one another into a new pattern (representing 4), and so on. Such patterns can represent almost anything. Engineers build computers from tiny electrical switches connected by wires simply because mechanical switches connected by rods or strings would be big, slow, unreliable, and expensive, today.

The idea of a purely mechanical computer is scarcely new. In England during the mid-1800s, Charles Babbage invented a mechanical computer built of brass gears; his co-worker Augusta Ada, the Countess of Lovelace, invented computer programming. Babbage's endless redesigning of the machine, problems with accurate manufacturing, and opposition from budget-watching critics (some doubting the usefulness of computers!), combined to prevent its completion.

Electronic nanocomputers will likely be thousands of times faster than electronic microcomputers - perhaps hundreds of thousands of times faster, if a scheme proposed by Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman works out. Increased speed through decreased size is an old story in electronics.

Disassemblers

Molecular computers will control molecular assemblers, providing the swift flow of instructions needed to direct the placement of vast numbers of atoms. Nanocomputers with molecular memory devices will also store data generated by a process that *is the* opposite of assembly.

Assemblers will help engineers synthesize things; their relatives, disassemblers, will help scientists and engineers analyze things. The case for assemblers rests on the ability of enzymes and chemical reactions to form bonds, and of machines to control the process. The case for disassemblers rests on the ability of enzymes and chemical reactions to break bonds, and of machines to control the process. Enzymes, acids, oxidizers, alkali metals, ions, and reactive groups of atoms called free radicals - all can break bonds and remove groups of

atoms. Because nothing is absolutely immune to corrosion, it seems that molecular tools will be able to take anything apart, a few atoms at a time. What is more, a nanomachine could (at need or convenience) apply mechanical force as well, in effect prying groups of atoms free.

A nanomachine able to do this, while recording what it removes layer by layer, is a disassembler. Assemblers, disassemblers, and nanocomputers will work together. For example, a nanocomputer system will be able to direct the disassembly of an object, record its structure, and then direct the assembly of perfect copies. And this gives some hint of the power of nanotechnology.

The World Made New

Assemblers will take years to emerge, but their emergence seems almost inevitable: Though the path to assemblers has many steps, each step will make the next-reach, and each will bring winnings. The first steps under the title "Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology" is taken. Seem possible, and other barriers to receiving assemblers. As advances in computer-aided design will accelerate the development of molecular tools, progress toward assemblers will quicken. The future of nanotechnology for assemblers.