Section 5: Determination of Atomic Weights for Non-Gaseous Elements (In Progress)

We can proceed with this type of measurement, deduction, and prediction for any compound which is a gas and which is made up of elements which are gases. But this will not help us with the atomic masses of non-gaseous elements, nor will it permit us to determine the molecular formulae for compounds which contain these elements.

Consider carbon, an important example. There are two oxides of carbon. Oxide A has oxygen to carbon mass ratio 1.33 : 1 and oxide B has mass ratio 2.66 : 1. Measurement of reacting volumes shows that we find that 1 liter of oxide A is produced from 0.5 liters of oxygen. Hence, each molecule of oxide A contains only half as many oxygen atoms as does an oxygen molecule. Oxide A thus contains one oxygen atom. But how many carbon atoms does it contain? We can't determine this yet because the elemental carbon is solid, not gas. This means that we also cannot determine what the mass of a carbon atom is.

But we can try a different approach: we weigh 1 liter of oxide A and 1 liter of oxygen gas. The result we find is that oxide A weighs 0.875 times per liter as much as oxygen gas. Since we have assumed that a fixed volume of gas contains a fixed number of particles, then 1 liter of oxide A contains just as many particles as 1 liter of oxygen gas. Therefore, each particle of oxide A weighs 0.875 times as much as a particle of oxygen gas (that is, an O_2

molecule). Since an O_2 molecule weighs 32 on our atomic mass scale, then a particle of oxide A weighs $0.875 \times 32 = 28$

. Now we know the molecular weight of oxide A.

Furthermore, we have already determined from the combining volumes that oxide A contains a single oxygen atom, of mass 16. Therefore, the mass of carbon in oxide A is 12. However, at this point, we do not know whether this is one carbon atom of mass 12, two atoms of mass 6, eight atoms of mass 1.5, or one of many other possibilities.

To make further progress, we make additional measurements on other carbon containing gas compounds. 1 liter of oxide B of carbon is formed from 1 liter of oxygen. Therefore, each oxide B molecule contains two oxygen atoms. 1 liter of oxide B weighs 1.375 times as much as 1 liter of oxygen. Therefore, one oxide B molecule has mass $1.375 \times 32 = 44$

. Since there are two oxygen atoms in a molecule of oxide B, the mass of oxygen in oxide B is 32. Therefore, the mass of carbon in oxide B is 12, the same as in oxide A.

We can repeat this process for many such gaseous compounds containing carbon atoms. In each case, we find that the mass of carbon in each molecule is either 12 or a multiple of 12. We never find, for examples, 6 or 18, which would be possible if each carbon atom had mass 6. The simplest conclusion is that a carbon atom has mass 12. Once we know the atomic mass of carbon, we can conclude that the molecular formula of oxide A is CO

, and that of oxide B is CO_2

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Therefore, the atomic masses of non-gaseous elements can be determined by mass and volume measurements on gaseous compounds containing these elements. This procedure is fairly general, and most atomic masses can be determined in this way.

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