Computer solves a century-old problem in three days

A computer came up with a new scientific theory completely on its own, without human intervention.

This is the first time something like this has happened, and its future applications are practically limitless.

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The theory in question tries to solve one of biology's biggest mysteries: how a sliced-up flatworm can regenerate into new organisms.

Computer scientists from the University of Maryland programmed a computer to randomly predict how a worm's genes formed a regulatory network capable of regeneration, before evaluating these predictions through simulation. Popular Mechanics writes in a report.

The computer took three days, in which it continuously predicted, simulated and evaluated different explanations, until finally it was able to come up with a core genetic network that explained how the worm's regeneration took place.

The study, Inferning Regulatory Networks from Experimental Morphological Phenotypes, done by researchers Michael Levin and Daniel Lobo, was first published in the journal PLOS on Thursday.

Levin and Lobo are quite adamant that what they programmed their computer to do is not just statistics or number-crunching: Levin said to Popular Mechanics.

"The invention of models to explain what nature is doing is the most creative thing scientists do... this is the heart and soul of the scientific enterprise," he says. "None of us could have come up with this model, we [as a field] have failed so far over a century of effort."

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The duo believes this approach could be used to create theories in any aspect of biology, including the process of cancer metastasis.