Ab-initio synthesis of amino-acids

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Abstract: The Urey-Miller experiment, demonstrated for the first time, the prebiotic synthesis of amino acids. Although this result has been reproduced multiple times experimentally, there have been very few in-silico attempts of the same. Our study explores the role of standard Gibbs free energy change as a key parameter in the in-silico synthesis of Glycine in a Miller-like experiment. A network theoretic approach is used to model the experiment and simulated annealing is used to scan the reaction space. Our model has identified key intermediates of glycine synthesis such as formaldehyde, aminoacetonitrile and produced glycine and alanine through the Strecker amino acid synthesis reaction. Our results show that the standard Gibbs free energy of Glycine (-664.58 KJ) was the lowest among all the compounds formed and hence substantiating our hypothesis.

Keywords: Network biology, Amino acid synthesis, Simulated annealing, Miller's experiment, Gibbs free energy, Strecker amino acid synthesis, Radon Graph Generation

1. INTRODUCTION

About seventy years ago, Stanley L. Miller and Harold C. Urey demonstrated the first evidence for the ab-initio synthesis of life. Their path-breaking experiment simulated conditions that are very similar to primitive Earth - atmosphere consisting of reducing gas mixture such as methane, ammonia and carbon dioxide, water as the solvent, acidic conditions and high electric current discharges accounting for lightning. Miller demonstrated that Glycine, α -Alanine, β-Alanine and Aspartic acid were formed from prebiotic Earth conditions (Miller (1953)). Miller's reaction mechanism (Pietrucci and Saitta (2015)) proved that hydrogen cyanide, formamide, aldehydes and ketones are the key precursors in amino acid synthesis. Similar results were observed in other experiments with varied initial gas mixture. The in-silico approach by Saitta and Saija (Saitta and Saija (2014)), using electric field potential as a key parameter has identified formaldehyde and formic acid as the key intermediates in the formation of Glycine.

Since Glycine is the simplest of the 20 naturally occurring α -amino acids, we decided to study its formation in our model. As stable compounds have highly negative standard Gibbs free energy change, we used this as the key parameter to evaluate the compounds formed in our in-silico model. In order to test our hypothesis, we used the thermodynamic data from the Reaction Mechanism Generator (RMG) web server, which is developed jointly by Richard H. West's research group at Northeastern University and William H. Green's research group at MIT.(Gao et al. (2016))

2. METHODS

2.1 Thermodynamic data collection

All thermodynamic data used in this study was obtained from the RMG web server. The data available in RMG is segregated in the form of libraries and the data available in all libraries are represented in one of the two formats - NASA and Group Additivity.

In the NASA format, coefficients of the NASA thermodynamic equations - heat capacity at constant pressure, standard enthalpy change and standard entropy change, for two different temperature regimes were available. The Group additivity format comprises of high charts of heat capacity at constant pressure, standard enthalpy change and standard entropy change as a function of temperature.

As no index of compounds was available in the database and as parsing data from highcharts using Python was tough, data from the NASA format was alone parsed. Since the temperature ranges varied across different libraries, the coefficients and their respective temperature ranges were parsed from the web servers and stored in a CSV format. The data parsed was segregated based on the source library and the compound's label within the library.

2.2 Initial network setup

A graph theory based approach has been used in this study, where the nodes represent the atoms and edges represent the covalent bonds between the atoms. The number of bonds that an atom can form is constrained by the valency of the atom. In order to accommodate multiple bonds between two atoms, we used the networkx MultiGraph object. Edge attributes were used to indicate the number of bonds between two atoms.

 $^{^{1}}$ Both authors contributed equally to this work

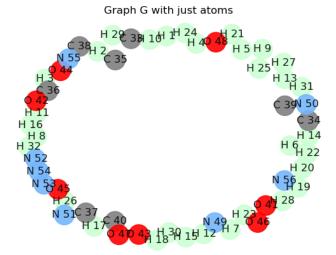


Fig. 1. Initial network with just the nodes - Carbon, Oxygen, Hydrogen and Nitrogen

In order to encapsulate all the above mentioned conditions, an Atom class was created. The name of the atom, its atomic symbol and its valency are attributes of the class. Instances of the Atom class were used as nodes in our network. Member functions of the class were used to access the maximum valency of an atom and the valency of the atom at any instant, given the network setup. An external function fix_valencies which takes graph as input was used to update the valencies of all the nodes in a graph.

The initial nodes in our network are - carbon, oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen. Based on the concentration calculations from Miller's original paper (Miller (1953)) and other insilico approaches (Saitta and Saija (2014)), we began the simulation with H:C:O:N ratio of 4:1:1:1, with a scaling factor of 8. As Python doesn't support multiple nodes having the same name, we introduced tagged nodes - with their atomic symbol and an index (number notation). Hence, the first 32 nodes represent "H 1" to "H 32" the next 8 nodes represent "C 33" to "C 40" and so on.

Based on the possible reaction mechanisms proposed by Miller and J. Bada (Miller (1953), Bada (2013)), initial edges resulting in the formation of 2 methane, 2 ammonia and 1 water molecules were added to the network. After each edge addition or deletion, the fix valencies function is called.

2.3 Gibbs free energy calculation

Functions were written to access the thermodynamic coefficients from the parsed CSV files (compound wise - given library, index number and across libraries) and calculate the standard enthalpy change, standard entropy change at any given temperature. Using the standard enthalpy change and standard entropy change, the standard Gibbs free energy difference for a compound was calculated.

Another graph H was created with an initial list of compounds. A dictionary with the subgraph of the connected components as the keys and their respective standard Gibbs free energy change as values was created. Whenever a compound is formed, it is compared for isomorphism with the connected components in graph H. If the compound is found to be non-isomorphic with the connected components in

Graph G with initial compounds

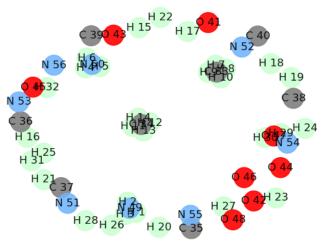


Fig. 2. Initial network with the initial compounds formed - Methane, Ammonia and Water

graph H, it is included in the dictionary and the standard Gibbs free energy change of the compound is taken as an input from the user.

2.4 Bond distribution (over iterations)

The maximum number of bonds that can be formed using all the nodes in the network was calculated. This was done by considering the sum of maximum valencies of all the nodes and reducing them by a factor of two (considering all single bonds). Taking the maximum number of bonds that can be formed and the iteration number as parameters, the get_number_bonds function, generates a Michaelis-Menten like curve to determine the number of bonds that can be formed at a given iteration.

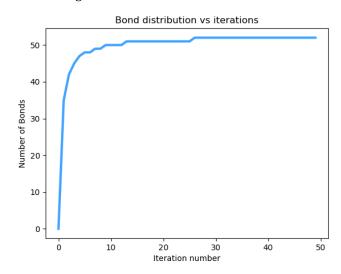


Fig. 3. Bond distribution over Iteration following a Michaelis-Menten like curve (Maximum bond size: 52)

2.5 Random Graph Generation

A random graph generator algorithm was used to generate connected components in our network, given the maximum size of the compound and the number of bonds to be

formed. For each iteration, the bond distribution function (get_number_bonds) was called and new bonds were introduced in the network whenever the number of edges in the network was found to be lesser than the number returned from get_number_bonds. Optimization of bond formation is implemented in the network in the following manner:

- (1) A random node is initially picked from all the nodes in the network.
- (2) All nodes which have their valency satisfied were rejected and more nodes were sampled.
- (3) Once a node with unsatisfied valency is picked, a second node is selected from the network, which also has an unsatisfied valency.
- (4) After the two nodes are selected, a random integer, max_num_edge, ranging from 1 to the minimum of the unsatisfied valencies of the two nodes is picked.
- (5) Between the two nodes picked, max_num_edge bonds are added.

This procedure is repeated until there is only one connected component having size less than max_size.

2.6 Ensuring electrical neutrality

After analyzing the results from our random graph generator algorithm, we noticed that the valencies of the atoms in the connected components formed weren't always satisfied. As RMG largely supports only electrically neutral species, the connected components obtained from random graph generator were made electrically neutral.

The electrical neutrality of the compounds was ensured in the following manner:

- All connected components of size 2 and above were selected
- (2) Atoms in the connected component that did not have a satisfied valency were identified and the valencies of the neighboring atoms were scanned. Atoms that had neighboring atoms with unsatisfied valency, were allowed to form multiple bonds with the neighboring atoms until the valency of the atom or its neighbor was satisfied.
- (3) If the valency of the atom is still not satisfied, then free hydrogens in the network were added to the atom with a valency deficiency. In order to take all cases into consideration, hydrogen atoms were added to the network when needed.

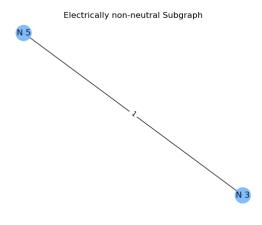
2.7 Simulated Annealing

A simulated annealing approach was used to generate the initial reaction intermediates in our network. The sum total of the Gibbs free energy change of compounds in the network was used as the measure of "goodness" of a solution state. As the iteration increases, the probability of accepting a bad solution decreases. This probability is governed by the following equations:

$$p = \exp\left(\frac{-(\Delta G_{tot,current}^{\circ} - \Delta G_{tot,best}^{\circ})}{T}\right)$$
 (1)

$$T = (0.995)^{iteration} T_{intial} \tag{2}$$

Where, ΔG_{tot}° represents the total standard free energy change, T represents the temperature and T_{intial} represents the initial temperature.



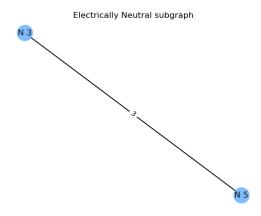
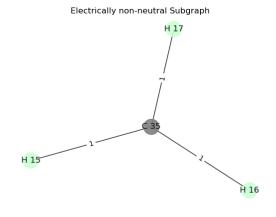


Fig. 4. Working example of ensuring electrical neutrality. 1 represents single bonds, 3 represents triple bonds (Multiple bonds between two atoms were created)



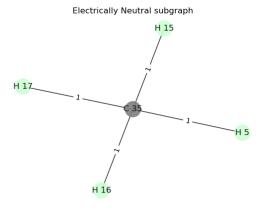


Fig. 5. Working example of ensuring electrical neutrality. Hydrogen atoms are added

In order to sample the solution space, the rearrange connected component function was used. A random variable (p), distributed uniformly between [0,1], was picked and the outcome of the random distribution was used to determine the intensity of connected component rearrangement. Based on the value of p, the extent of reshuffling was determined in the following manner:

- p < 0.1: All the connected components are completely reshuffled
- 0.1 < p < 0.6: Four connected components are selected, two reshufflings are performed
- 0.6
- p > 0.8: No reshuffling is performed

2.8 Rearrange connected components

The rearrange_connected_components function is used to increase the sample space of the simulated annealing approach. Two nodes from two different connected components that have the same number of edges to another node are picked. The two connected components are split and the compounds are crossed over. The number of crossovers in the graph are largely determined by p from Simulated Annealing.

2.9 Consolidation of all the compounds obtained so far

A graph consisting of all the unique compounds formed so far was created. All connected components of size 5(8) and above were removed from the graph. As the computational ability available to us was limited, the above mentioned set of codes were run for different initial conditions and the final set of compounds of size 4(7) and less, were consolidated across runs. A total of 11(15) unique compounds were added to a new graph N for further analysis of Glycine(Alanine) formation.

2.10 Reaction simulation

As most of the compounds obtained after the consolidation were Lewis acids and bases, acid-base-like reactions were

stimulated using hydrogen atoms. A constraint for the maximum size of compounds that can form was imposed. The in-silico reaction mechanism is simulated as follows:

- (1) A pair of connected components were selected from the graph sequentially.
- (2) All the hydrogen atoms in both the connected components were identified. And if any of the components didn't have hydrogen atoms, it was prevented from being iterated again.
- (3) If the connected component had more than one hydrogen atom, the subsequent reactions was carried out sequentially for all the hydrogen atoms. The hydrogen atoms picked from the two connected components were named hydro1 and hydro2.
- (4) The neighbor of the hydrogen atoms hydro1 and hydro2, from the connected components, was identified and named neighbor1 and neighbor2.
- (5) The bonds between the (neighbor1, hydro1) and (neighbor2, hydro2) were broken and bonds between (neighbor1, neighbor2) were created.
- (6) Atoms that have neighbors that are not exclusively hydrogen atoms were identified. If the number of atoms having a non hydrogen neighbor is greater than one, then the entire list is looped over sequentially to obtain all possible combinations. The atom picked was named non_h_neighbor.
- (7) Edges between the hydro1 atom non_h_neighbor are added in the graph and an edge between non_h_neighbor and one of its initial neighbors (init_neigh) is removed from the graph to satisfy the valency conditions. A bond between init_neigh and hydro2 is added to the network.
- (8) All new compounds are added to a dictionary as the key and the standard Gibbs free energy value is taken as the value.

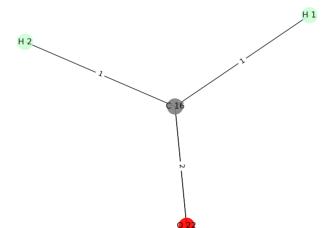


Fig. 6A. Reactant 1: Formaldehyde

Fig. 6B. Reactant 2: Hydrogen Cyanide

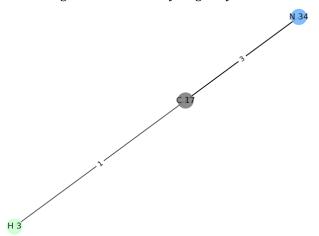


Fig. 6C. Hydrogen selected: H 1(hydro1) and H 3(hydro2. Bond formed between C16(neigh1) and C17(neigh2):

Glyoxylonitrile

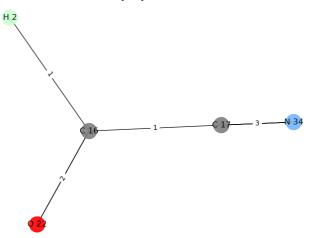


Fig. 6D. Hydrogens added back to the compound with C 17(non_h_neighbor) and N 34 (inti_neigh):
Iminoacetaldehyde

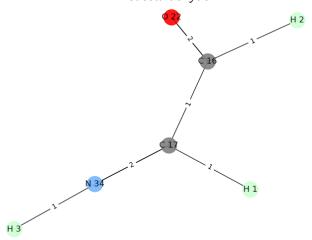


Fig. 6. Working example of the reaction simulation mediated by Hydrogen atoms

Once all possible combinations of reactions are performed, the resulting dictionary is passed as the output. As this func-

tion was largely dependent on the order of reaction between the connected components, upto twenty possible combinations of the order were tried and the results were consolidated.

In order to check if the compounds returned from this function existed, the compounds were searched using their structure on ChemSpider, database managed by the Royal Society of Chemistry (Pence and Williams (2010)). In cases where the compound returned did not exist, a penalty of 100 KJ was awarded as the Gibbs free energy to the compound. All entries in the dictionary were screened and compounds that have a standard Gibbs free energy change greater than 10KJ were removed from the dictionary for further analysis.

2.11 Strecker amino acid synthesis

Since hydrogen cyanide, formaldehyde and aminoacetonitrile were present among the list of compounds obtained so far, we decided to perform the Strecker's amino acids synthesis reaction for all aldehydes and ketones. The Strecker's amino acid synthesis reaction is also a part of the Urey-Miller experiment, which finally led to the synthesis of amino acids. This is implemented in our model by scanning the list of compounds obtained for aldehydes and ketones. Compounds were also scanned for presence of aminonitriles. The ammonia and hydrogen cyanide used in this reaction were added as additional nodes in the network. This was done to ensure that all aldehydes and ketones in the initial list would take part in the Strecker's reaction. These additional nodes introduced in this step were numbered from 100. The strecker amino acids synthesis is as follows:

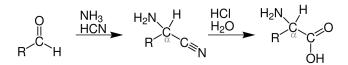


Fig. 7. Strecker amino acid synthesis mechanism (GerrietB (2016))

Fig. 8 A. Initial reactant: Formaldehyde

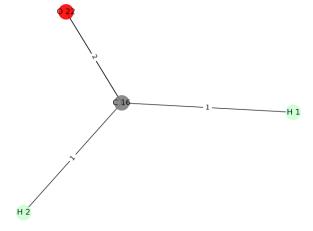


Fig. 8 B. Addition of ammonia: Aminomethanol

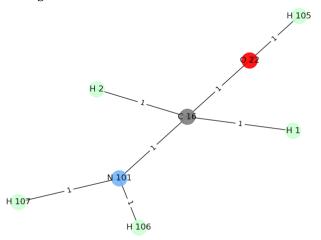


Fig. 8 C. Addition of hydrogen cyanide: Aminoacetonitrile

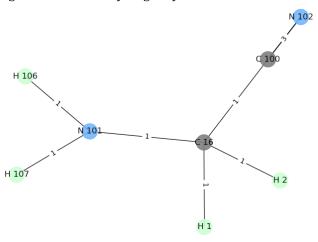


Fig. 8 D. Acid hydrolysis: Glycine

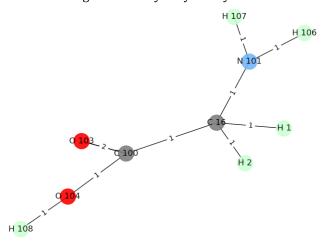


Fig. 8. Working example of Strecker reaction - Glycine formation

Acid hydrolysis on these compounds was performed insilico by adding an amino and carboxylic acid group or by converting the cyanide group into a carboxylic acid group.

Fig. 9 A. Initial reactant: Acetaldehyde

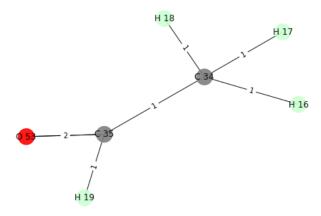


Fig. 9 B. Addition of ammonia: Ethylamine

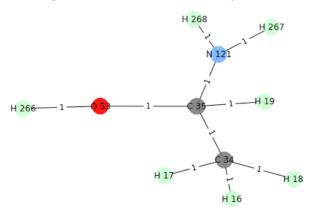
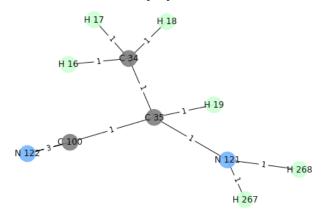


Fig. 9 C. Addition of hydrogen cyanide: 2-Aminopropanenitrile



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Random graph generator was used to generate compounds from the initial set of atoms, with a size limitation of 2 and 3. The resultant compounds were used as inputs for the simulated annealing function. The simulated annealing function was used to scan the reaction space and return a set of compounds that have low Gibbs free energy. The output from simulated annealing was screened for compounds that have a size lesser than 4 for Glycine and 7 for Alanine. These compounds were used as inputs to the acid-base reaction function and the enhanced output was then used as an input for the Strecker amino acid synthesis reaction. Through-

Fig. 9 D. Acid hydrolysis: Alanine

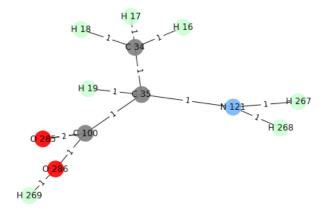


Fig. 9. Working example of Strecker reaction - Alanine formation

out our model, the compounds generated were analyzed, filtered and eliminated based on their standard Gibbs free energy.

From analysis of the final set of products formed, we found that formaldehyde, aminoacetonitrile and hydrogen cyanide were the key intermediates for the formation of glycine. This can be observed from the numbering of the atoms in Fig. 8. The Gibbs free energy distribution over reaction progress is as follows:

Table 1. Gibbs free energy distribution of intermediates involved in Glycine synthesis

Gibbs free energy change (KJ)
-269.5222798
-193.3923271
1.575047801
-664.5829247

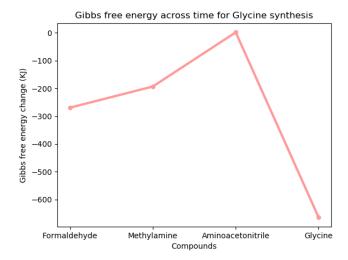


Fig. 10. Gibbs free energy across time for Glycine synthesis

Table 2. Gibbs free energy distribution of intermediates involved in Alanine synthesis

Compound	Gibbs free energy change (KJ)
Acetaldehyde	-368.2453749
Ethylamine	-263.9192457
2-Aminopropanenitrile	-6.190248565965583
Alanine	-623.24864

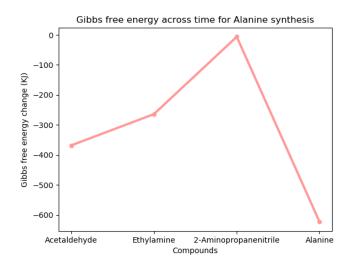


Fig. 11. Gibbs free energy across time for Alanine synthesis

From Fig. 10 and Fig. 11, we find that our model was able to identify the characteristic peak and drop in the Gibbs free energy change that is generally associated with all chemical reactions.

The formation of glycine ($\Delta G^{\circ}:-664.5829247KJ)$ in this study with the standard Gibbs free energy change as the key parameter strengthened our hypothesis that highly negative free energy of amino acids in prebiotic Earth conditions could have caused their accumulation and eventual buildup. The results obtained from this study were ratified by several previous studies.

- All codes written as a part of the project are available on GitHub: https://github.com/sowmyamanojna/Computational-Systems-Biology-project.
- The Gibbs free energy difference of all compounds formed in our model is available here: https://bit.ly/2BSSLqr.
- The images of all compounds formed in our project is available here: https://bit.ly/2Zwo8Pu.

Table 3. Gibbs free energy distribution of other key compounds formed in our model

Compound	Gibbs free energy change (KJ)
Formamide	-374.5075468
Nitrosamine	-107.61248
Hydroxylamine	-215.860156
Glycolonitrile	-261.5047571
Iminoacetaldehyde	-7.380497132
Nitroxyl / Azazone	-55.40205694
Hydrogen peroxide	-309.1934413

4. CHALLENGES FACED

The unavailability of an index for charged and lone pair compounds, did not permit us to simulate detailed reactions involving electron exchanges or incomplete compounds. This limitation forced us to ensure electrical neutrality of all the compounds formed. A simulated annealing approach with narrow acceptance rate for configurations with high Gibbs free energy was imposed in the consequent steps.

The other challenge that we faced in the project was the acid-base reaction simulation. A total of 11 unique compounds were sent as input to the acid-base reaction. The order in which these compounds were sent was randomized. As the function depends on the order of compounds, a total of 110 trails should have been done. However, as each trail resulted in approximately 10 new graphs, we weren't computationally equipped to handle 110 runs. The attempt to run the same, resulted in high memory utilization which led to our laptop computers hanging. Hence, we restricted our study to just 20 runs. This project could be made better by addressing the factors listed above.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our Professor Karthik Raman for giving us this opportunity to work on many interesting and open-ended problems as a part of our Computational Systems Biology course. We owe our knowledge gained to our professor who has made the subject engaging and very interesting.

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Supplementary Information

Ab-initio synthesis of Amino acids

1 Summary of compounds formed

1.1 List of compounds

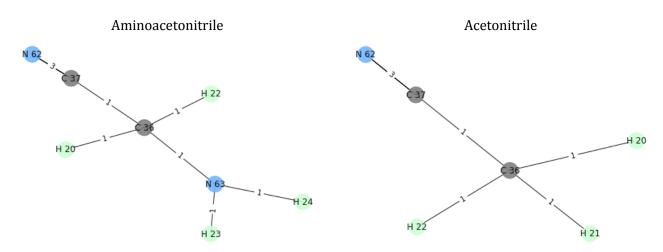
The list of compounds formed during the simulation of Miller-like experiment by our model is as follows:

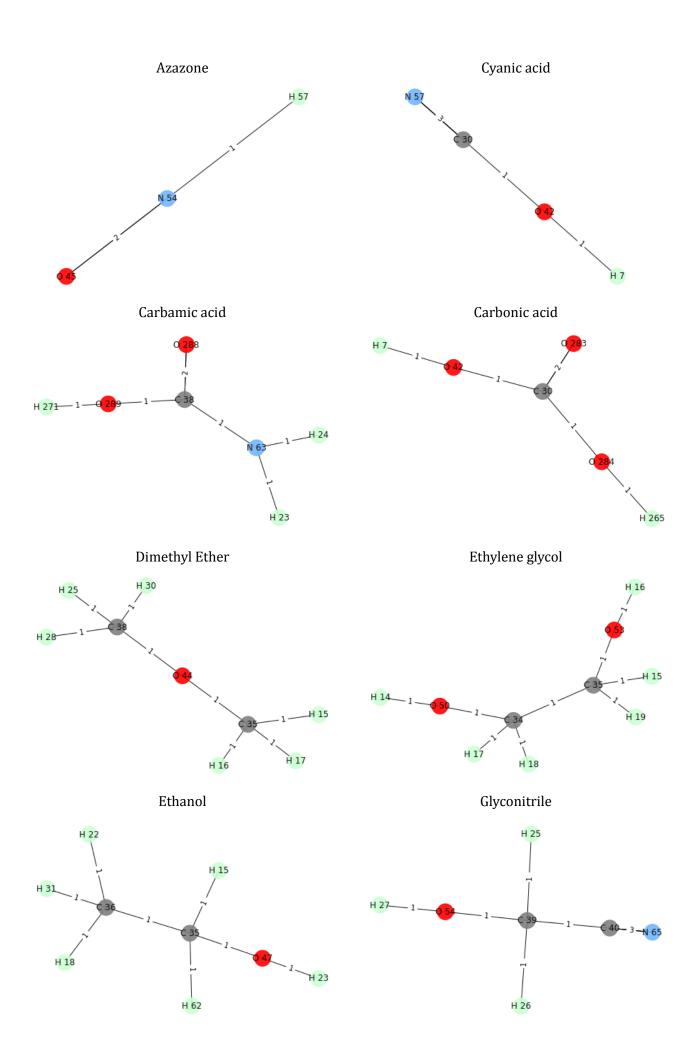
Compound formed	Formula	Compound formed	Formula
Aminooxy-acetylene	C2H3NO	Formaldehyde Oxime/ Formaldoxime	CH3NO
Aminooxy-ethane	C2H7NO	Formamide	CH3NO
1-Methylurea	C2H6N2O	Formamidine	CH4N2
1-0xodiazoxane	H2N2O2	Formic acid	CH2O2
1,1-Dihydroxyhydrazine	H4N2O2	Glycine	C2H5NO2
1,1-Ethanediol	C2H6O2	Glycoaldehyde	C2H4O2
2-Aminopropanenitrile	C3H6N2	Glycolic acid	C2H4O3
2-Hydroxyacetonitrile/ Glycolonitrile	C2H3NO	Glyoxylonitrile	C2HNO
2-Propyn-1-amine	C3H5N	Hydrazine	N2H4
3-Methylbut-1-ene	C5H10	Hydrogen	H2
Acetaldehyde	C2H4O	Hydrogen Peroxide	H2O2
Acetic acid	C2H4O2	Hydrogen Polyoxide	H2O4
Acetohydroxamic acid	C2H5NO2	Hydroperoxyamine	H3NO2
Acetonitrile	C2H3N	Hydroperoxyl	HO2
Acetylenamine	C2H3N	Hydroxyamino methanol	CH5NO2
Alanine	C3H8NO2	Hydroxyhydrazine	H4N2O
Alanine*	C3H7NO2	Hydroxylamine	H3NO
Alaninol	C3H9NO	Hyponitrous acid	H2N2O2
Amino acetate	C2H5NO2	Iminoacetaldehyde	C2H3NO
Aminoacetonitrile	C2H4N2	Isomer 1 - Glycine	C2H5NO2
Aminomethanediol	CH5NO2	Isomer 2 - Glycine	C2H5NO2
Aminomethanol	CH5NO	Isomer 3 - Glycine	C2H5NO2
Aminoperoxy amine	H4N2O2	Methane	CH4
Ammonia	NH3	Methanimine	CH3N
Butanol	C4H10O	Methanol	СНЗОН
Carbamic acid	CH3NO2	Methoxyamine	CH5NO
Carbon dioxide	CO2	Methoxymethanol	C2H6O2
Carbon monoxide	CO	Methylamine	CH3NH2
Carbonic acid	CH203	Methylcarbamic acid	C2H5NO2
Cyanamide	CH2N2	Methyldiazene	CH4N2
Cyanic acid	HOCN	Methylformamide	C2H5NO

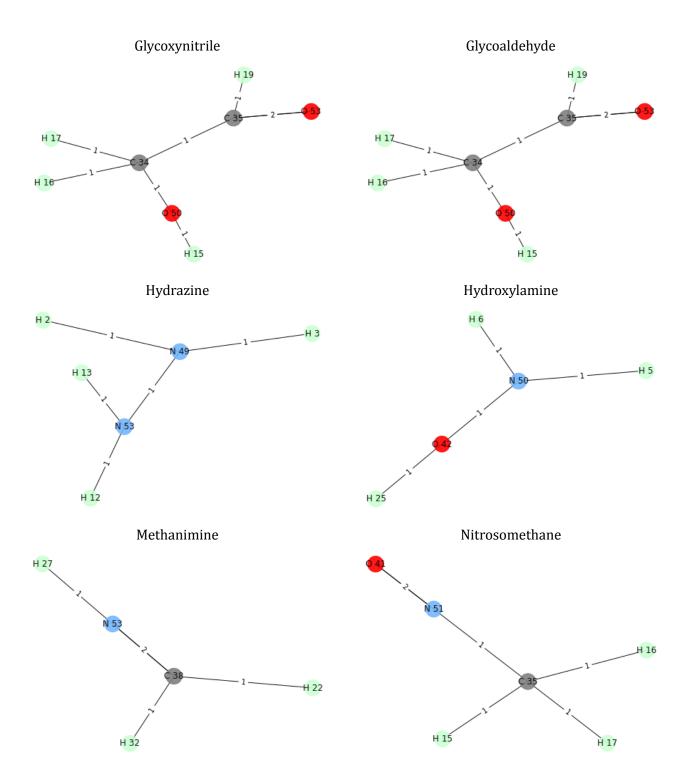
Cyanide	HCN	Methylhydroperoxide	CH402
Diaminomethane	CH6N2	Monomethyl hydrazine	CH3(NH)NH2
Diazene	N2H2	N-aminohydroxylamine	H4N2O
Diazoxane	H4N2O	N-Hydroxyacetylenamine	C2H2NO
Dihydroxyamine	H3NO2	N-methylhydroxylamine	CH5NO
Dihydroxymethylidene	CH402	N-Nitrosomethanamine	CH4N2O
Dimethylamine	(CH3)2NH	Nitric Oxide	NO
Dimethylether	C2H6O	Nitrogen	N2
Ethane	C2H6	Nitrosoamine	H2N2O
Ethanol	С2Н5ОН	Nitrosoformaldehyde oxime	CH2N2O2
Ethene	C2H4	Nitrosomethane	CH3NO
Ethenimine	C2H3N	Nitrosomethanol	CH3NO2
Ethenone	C2H2O	Nitrous acid	HNO2
Ethylamine	C2H7N	Nitroxyl / Azazone	HNO
Ethylene dione	C2O2	Oxygen	02
Ethylene glycol	C2H6O2	Performic acid	CH2O3
Ethylhydrazine	C2H8N2	Propane	С3Н8
Ethylmethylamine	C3H9N	Propanol	С3Н8О
Ethyne	C2H2	Triazane	N3H5
Formaldehyde	CH2O	Trioxidane	H2O3
Formaldehyde hydrazone	CH4N2	Water	H2O

1.2 Structure of the compounds

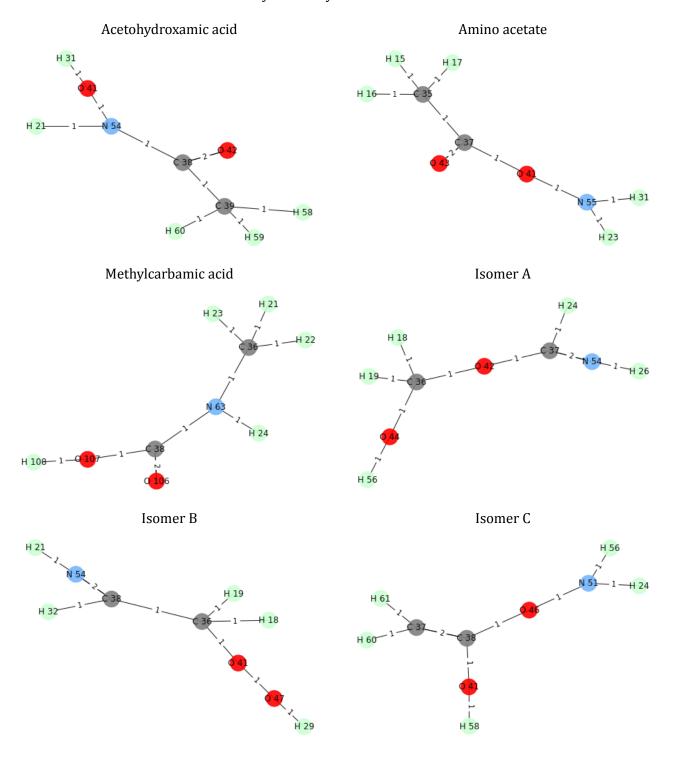
The structure of the compounds formed is as follows:







We also obtained several isomers of Glycine. They are as follows:



The remaining images can be accessed here: https://bit.ly/2Zwo8Pu.