



- (51) **International Patent Classification:**
F16K 31/06 (2006.01) *F16K 27/02* (2006.01)
- (21) **International Application Number:**
PCT/IB2012/051604
- (22) **International Filing Date:**
2 April 2012 (02.04.2012)
- (25) **Filing Language:** Italian
- (26) **Publication Language:** English
- (30) **Priority Data:**
TO2011A000291 1 April 2011 (01.04.2011) IT
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- (81) **Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of national protection available):** AE, AG, AL, AM,

AO, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BH, BR, BW, BY, BZ, CA, CH, CL, CN, CO, CR, CU, CZ, DE, DK, DM, DO, DZ, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, GT, HN, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KM, KN, KP, KR, KZ, LA, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LY, MA, MD, ME, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, MY, MZ, NA, NG, NI, NO, NZ, OM, PE, PG, PH, PL, PT, QA, RO, RS, RU, RW, SC, SD, SE, SG, SK, SL, SM, ST, SV, SY, TH, TJ, TM, TN, TR, TT, TZ, UA, UG, US, UZ, VC, VN, ZA, ZM, ZW.

- (84) **Designated States (unless otherwise indicated, for every kind of regional protection available):** ARIPO (BW, GH, GM, KE, LR, LS, MW, MZ, NA, RW, SD, SL, SZ, TZ, UG, ZM, ZW), Eurasian (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European (AL, AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, HR, HU, IE, IS, IT, LT, LU, LV, MC, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, RS, SE, SI, SK, SM, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

Declarations under Rule 4.17:

- as to applicant's entitlement to apply for and be granted a patent (Rule 4.17(ii))
- of inventorship (Rule 4.17(iv))

Published:

- without international search report and to be republished upon receipt of that report (Rule 48.2(g))

(54) **Title:** ELECTRIC VALVE DEVICE, IN PARTICULAR FOR A DEVICE FOR FORMING ICE IN A FRIDGE

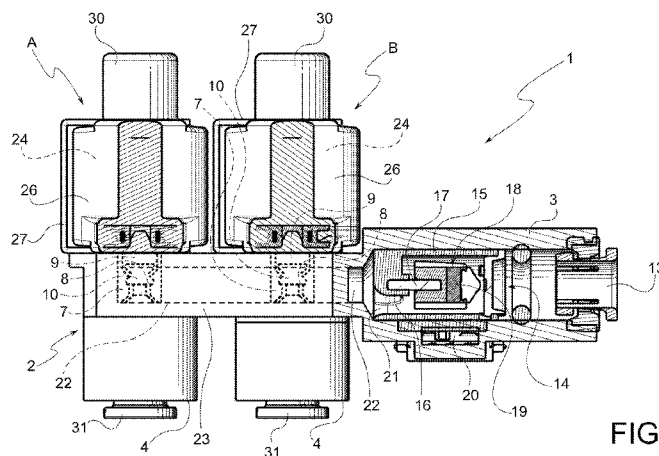


FIG. 3

(57) **Abstract:** An electric valve device (1), comprising: a hollow body (2, 6) with an inlet (3; 22) and an outlet (4) for a flow of fluid, in particular a liquid, between which, inside said body (2, 6), there is defined a chamber (7) in which there is provided a valve seat (8) intended to cooperate with an associated closing member (10) for controlling communication between the inlet (3; 22) and the outlet (4); and a tubular guiding formation (5) which is nominally coaxial with the valve seat (8) and inside which there is mounted, axially displaceably to and from the seat (8), a core (9) which carries the closing member (10) and the position of which with respect to the seat (8) can be electromagnetically controlled by means of a winding or solenoid (24) arranged around said tubular formation (5). The hollow body (2, 6) and the tubular guiding formation (5) are made as a single piece of moulded plastic.

Electric valve device, in particular for a device for forming ice in a fridge

The present invention relates in general to an electric valve device and in particular an electric valve which can be used in a device for forming ice in a fridge, comprising:

a hollow body with an inlet and an outlet for a flow of fluid, in particular a liquid, between which, inside said body, there is defined a chamber in which there is provided a valve seat intended to cooperate with an associated closing member for controlling communication between the inlet and the outlet; and

a tubular guiding formation which is nominally coaxial with the valve seat and inside which there is mounted, axially displaceably to and from said seat, a core which carries the closing member and the position of which with respect to the valve seat can be electromagnetically controlled by means of a winding or solenoid arranged around said tubular formation.

In order to control flows which characteristically have small flow-rates, electric valve devices which are normally used for medium/high flow-rates, for example in household appliances, are often used, suitably modified for operation at small flow-rates.

An example of such an electric valve assembly for the metered supply of cold water in a fridge is described and illustrated in Italian patent application TO2010A000506 in the name of the same Applicant.

These modified electric valve devices generally have relatively large valve chambers having, formed inside them, valve seats with a small diameter depending on the flow-rates envisaged. Such modified electric valve devices in general have dimensions which are unnecessarily large in relation to the requirements.

Moreover, in such electric valve devices the valve body is generally formed as two parts which are firmly connected together by means of a threaded union. The tubular guiding formation inside which the core carrying the closing member is mounted is generally made as one piece with one of these parts and, following assembly, may not be perfectly coaxial with the valve seat, with potential problems in terms of reliability of operation of the

electric valve device as a whole.

One object of the present invention is to propose an electric valve device for small flow-rates which is able to overcome the abovementioned drawbacks of the solutions according to the prior art.

This object, together with other objects, is achieved according to the invention by an electric valve device of the type specified above, characterized primarily in that the abovementioned body and the tubular guiding formation are made as one piece of moulded plastic.

In one embodiment the distal end of said tubular formation, opposite the valve seat, is closed by a plug or cover separate from and connected to said tubular formation.

In an advantageous embodiment the aforementioned plug or cover is conveniently used also to lock axially on the valve body the assembly formed by the winding or solenoid and the associated structure for conduction of the magnetic flux generated by this winding or solenoid.

In another embodiment the distal end of this tubular formation is blind, being formed as one piece, and the valve seat is formed as a separate part fixed inside the valve chamber, for example by means of welding or bonding.

Conveniently, the chamber of the valve body has substantially the same cross-section as the passage defined inside said tubular formation.

Further characteristic features and advantages of the invention will become clear from the following detailed description provided purely by way of a non-limiting example, with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

Figure 1 is a perspective view of a twin electric valve device provided according to the present invention;

Figure 2 is a cross-sectional view along the line II-II of Figure 1;

Figure 3 is a cross-sectional view along the line III-III of Figure 1; and

Figure 4 is a perspective view which shows a single-piece moulded plastic body included in the electric valve device according to the preceding figures.

In Figure 1 an electric valve device according to the present invention is denoted overall by 1.

In the exemplary embodiment shown, the device 1 is of the twin type, in that it comprises two electric valves, denoted by A and B, which are formed with a common single-piece valve body 2 with a single tubular inlet conduit 3 and respective outlets 4 for the fluid.

The invention is not, however, limited to such a "twin" embodiment, but also embraces within its scope other embodiments comprising an electric valve of the multiple type (three or more units) or single type.

Figure 2 shows a cross-sectional view of solely the electric valve A. The electric valve B has the same general configuration.

In the embodiment shown, the valve body 2 (see in particular Figure 4) is made as a single piece of moulded plastic. This body 2 has in particular two cylindrical tubular formations 5 (Figures 2 and 4) which are parallel to each other.

As can be seen in particular in Figure 2, for each electric valve A (B), the tubular formation 5 of the body 2 extends from a corresponding hollow block or body 6 which forms integrally, in its bottom part, the respective outlet 4 in the form of a tubular formation preferably coaxial with the top tubular formation 5. Alternatively, the outlets 4 may be formed frontally, or oriented in a direction forming an angle with respect to the axis of the corresponding tubular formation 5, but still as one piece with the block or body 6, as for example shown in Figure 5.

Inside each hollow block or body 6 there is defined a respective valve chamber 7 (Figures 2 and 3) in which a valve seat 8 coaxial with the tubular formation 5 is formed.

Inside the tubular formation 5 of each section or electric valve A, B there is mounted, axially displaceably, a ferromagnetic core 9 which, at the bottom end, carries a closing member 10 intended to co-operate with the corresponding valve seat 8.

Conveniently, the valve chamber 7 has transversely the same cross-section as the passage defined inside the tubular formation 5, as can be understood in particular when viewing Figure 2.

In the exemplary embodiment shown, a respective ferromagnetic element 11, acting as a fixed core, co-operating with the associated movable core 9, is fixed in the distal portion of each tubular formation 5 (Figure 2). A spring 12, tending to push the movable core 9 towards the valve seat 8, is formed between each fixed core 11 and the associated movable core 9.

Embodiments without a fixed core are however possible.

With reference to Figures 1, 3 and 4, the single-piece body 2 of the electric valve device integrally forms the cylindrical inlet conduit 3. In the embodiment shown by way of example (see Figure 3) the distal end of the cylindrical inlet conduit 3 is provided with a quick-fit coupling 13 for connection of an external inlet pipe (not shown). The quick-fit coupling 13 is for example a coupling manufactured by the company John Guest.

Alternatively, in place of a quick-fit coupling, the conduit 3 may be provided with a coupling of another type, known per se, for example a threaded union, preferably formed as one piece with this conduit and with the overall body 2.

As can be seen in Figure 3, a flow-rate measuring device, denoted overall by 14, may be conveniently mounted inside the cylindrical inlet conduit 3. In the embodiment shown by way of example this flow-rate measuring device 14 is contained in an essentially cylindrical, cartridge-like, support casing 15 inserted in the passage defined in the inlet conduit 3 and having an external diameter which is close to that of the quick-fit coupling

13.

In the embodiment shown the body 15 has a mainly tubular form and, at one end, has a central hub 16 inside which a pin 17 which defines the axis of rotation of a bladed impeller 18 provided with a permanent magnet 19 is axially fixed.

During operation, a flow of liquid supplied to the inlet conduit 3 acts on the bladed impeller 18, causing a rotation thereof around the axis defined by the pin 17. The corresponding rotation of the magnet 19 is detected by means of a circuit of the type known per se, the components of which are mounted on a board 20 (Figure 3) housed inside a seat provided in the wall of the conduit 3. The speed of rotation of the impeller 18 is dependent on the flow-rate of the liquid flow acting on it and causes the generation of an electric signal, the frequency (or phase) of which forms a reliable indication of said flow-rate.

With reference to Figure 3, the support casing 15 of the flow-rate measuring device 14 has a plurality of outlet openings 21, only one of which can be seen in this figure. During operation, the liquid which flows out through these openings reaches a passage 22 defined inside an inlet header 23 which is formed integrally with the body 2 of the electric valve device. From the inlet conduit 3 the header 23 reaches firstly the chamber 7 of the electric valve B and then the chamber 7 of the electric valve A (see in particular Figure 3).

These electric valves A, B are therefore able to control communication between the inlet conduit 3 and the respective outlet 4.

In variations of embodiments not shown the support casing 15 may be made as one piece with the end 2.

Figure 6 shows in schematic form a variation of embodiment of the flow-rate measuring device 14. In this figure, parts already described have been assigned again the same reference numbers used previously.

In the embodiment according to Figure 6, the flow-rate measuring device 14 comprises an impeller or turbine 18 and a permanent magnet 19 integral therewith, rotation thereof being detected by means of a winding 50, the axis of which forms an angle, for example of about 40°, with respect to the axis of the turbine or impeller 18. The winding 50 is arranged around a portion of the cylindrical inlet conduit 3 which, as already mentioned previously, is made of non-magnetic material, in particular plastic. Said portion of the inlet conduit 3 is conveniently surrounded by a tube or sleeve 51 of ferromagnetic material.

With reference again to Figure 2, each electric valve of the electric valve device 1 has a respective winding or solenoid 24 mounted on a spool 25. This spool is encapsulated inside a coating 26 and is surrounded by a member 27 made of magnetically conductive material which, in the embodiment shown, is shaped essentially in the form of a C.

The assembly formed by the spool 25, the solenoid 24, the coating 26 and the element 27 is mounted on the tubular formation 5 of the associated electric valve A or B.

The distal ends of the tubular formations 5 of these electric valves are then enclosed in a fluid-tight manner by a closing element such as a cover or plug 30 (Figures 1 to 3). These covers or plugs may be conveniently made of non-magnetic material, in particular moulded plastic, and may be connected to the associated tubular formations 5 for example by means of heat welding or bonding.

The distal ends of the tubular formations 5 extend through the corresponding assemblies 24-27 including the windings or solenoids 24 and the magnetic-flux conducting members 27 and protrude outside these assemblies 24-27.

As can be understood in particular by viewing Figure 2, the plugs 30 conveniently help grip and keep firmly in position the corresponding assemblies comprising the windings 24, the spools 25 and the members 27 of the associated magnetic circuits.

Conveniently, although not necessarily, the outlets 4 of the electric valves A and B may be provided with respective quick-fit couplings 31 for the connection of external outlet pipes

(not shown).

With reference to Figure 1, each of the electric valves A and B is provided with a respective electrical connector 32 for the connection of the respective winding to external driving circuits (not shown). The electric valves A and B can thus be selectively excited to open so as to allow a flow of liquid (water) from the tubular inlet conduit 3 towards the respective outlet 4.

Obviously, without affecting the principle of the invention, the embodiments and the constructional details may be significantly varied with respect to that described and illustrated purely by way of a non-limiting example, without thereby departing from the scope of the invention as defined in the accompanying claims.

CLAIMS

1. Electric valve device (1), comprising
a hollow body (2, 6) with an inlet (3; 22) and an outlet (4) for a flow of a fluid, in particular a liquid, between which, inside said body (2, 6), there is defined a chamber (7) in which there is provided a valve seat (8) intended to cooperate with an associated closing member (10) so as to control communication between the inlet (3; 22) and the outlet (4);
and
a tubular guiding formation (5) which is nominally coaxial with the valve seat (8) and inside which there is mounted, axially displaceably to and from said seat (8), a core (9) which carries the closing member (10) and the position of which with respect to the seat (8) can be electromagnetically controlled by means of a winding or solenoid (24) arranged around said tubular formation (5);
the electric valve device (1) being characterized in that said body (2, 6) and the tubular guiding formation (5) are made as a single piece of moulded plastic.
2. Electric valve device (1) according to Claim 1, wherein the distal end of said tubular formation (5), opposite the valve seat (8), is closed by a plug or cover (30) separate from and connected to said tubular formation (5).
3. Electrical valve device according to Claim 1 or 2, wherein the valve seat (8) is made as a piece separate from said body (2) and is fixed inside said chamber (7), for instance by welding or gluing.
4. Electric valve device according to one of the preceding claims, wherein said chamber (7) has substantially the same cross-section as the passage defined inside said tubular formation (5).
5. Electric valve device according to one of the preceding claims, wherein said winding or solenoid (24) is surrounded at least in part by an associated magnetic flux conducting member (27), with which it forms an assembly (24-27) provided with a through-opening inside which said tubular formation (5) extends.

6. Electric valve device according to Claim 1 or 2 and Claim 5, wherein said assembly (24-27) is axially locked on said body (2, 6) by means of the plug or cover (30) connected to the distal end of said tubular formation (5).

7. Electric valve device according to Claim 5, wherein said magnetic flux conducting member (27) is shaped like a C or a U and has two facing branches through which said tubular formation (5) preferably passes.

8. Electric valve device according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein a ferromagnetic member (11) acting as a fixed core cooperating with said movable core (9) is fixed in the distal portion of said tubular formation (5).

9. Electric valve device according to Claim 7, wherein a spring (12) which tends to push the movable core (9) towards the valve seat (8) is arranged between the movable core (9) and the fixed core (11).

10. Electric valve device according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the outlet (4) for the fluid is provided in the body (2) and extends in a direction forming an angle with respect to the axis of said tubular formation (5).

11. Electric valve device according to any one of Claims 1 to 8, wherein the outlet (4) for the fluid is provided in the body (2, 6) on the opposite side to the tubular formation (5) relative to the valve seat (8) and is preferably coaxial with said tubular formation (5) and said seat (8).

12. Electric valve device according to Claim 9 or 10, wherein the outlet (4) is shaped as a cylindrical passage in which a quick-fit coupling (31) for the connection of an external outlet pipe is fixed.

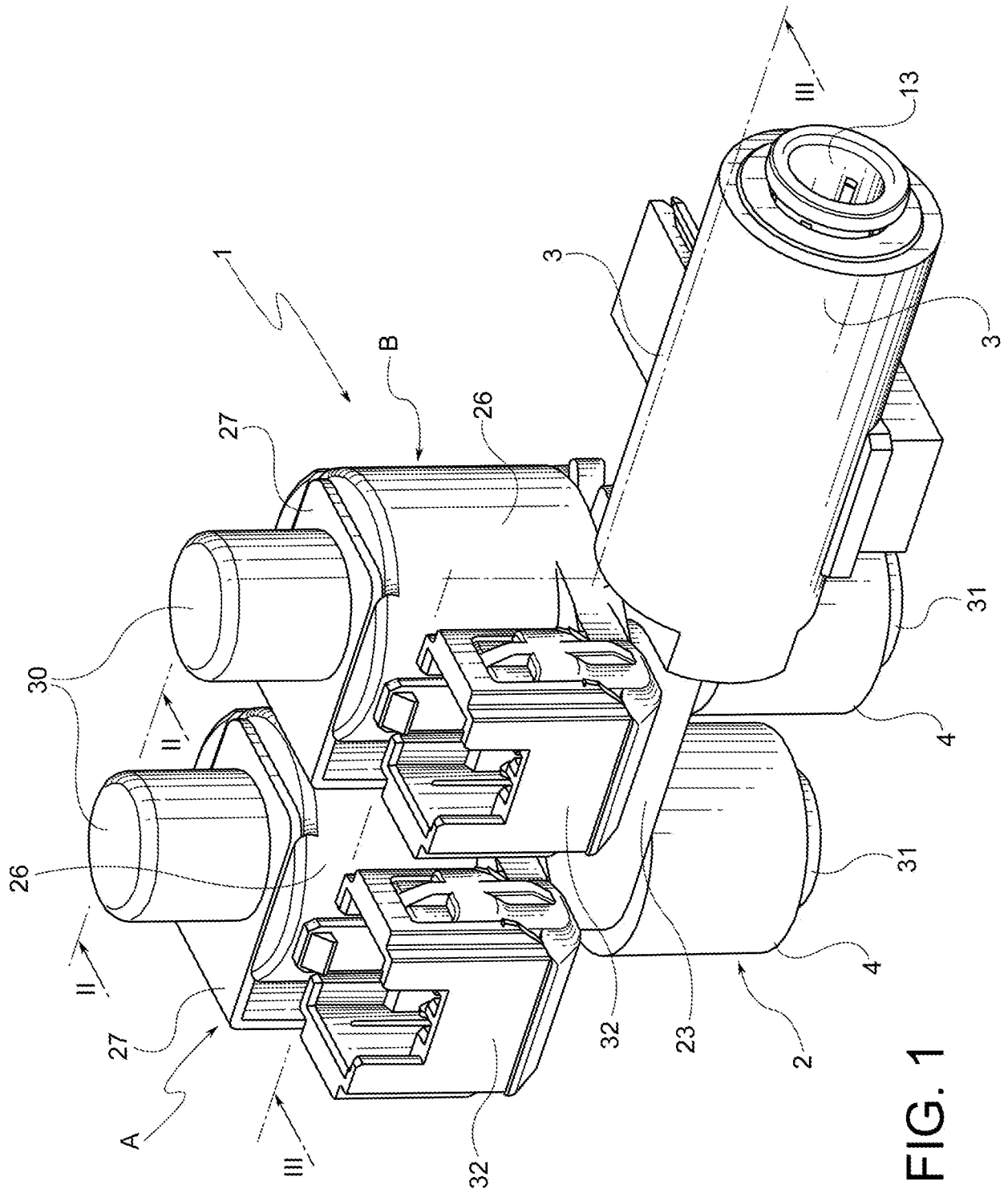
13. Electric valve device according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein a cylindrical inlet conduit (3) for the flow of the fluid, provided with a coupling, in particular

a quick-fit coupling (13), for the connection of an external inlet pipe, is integrally formed in said body (2, 6), a flow-rate measuring device (14) of the kind comprising a bladed impeller (18) being mounted in said cylindrical conduit (3).

14. Electric valve device according to Claim 13, wherein said flow-rate measuring device (14) is contained in an essentially cylindrical, cartridge-like, support casing (15) inserted in said inlet conduit (3) and having an external diameter which is close to that of the inlet coupling (13).

15. Electric valve device according to Claim 13, wherein the flow-rate measuring device (14) comprises a permanent magnet (19) which is rotationally rigid with said impeller (18), and an associated detection winding (50), the axis of which forms an angle with respect to the axis of the impeller (18), for detecting the rotation of said magnet (19), a tube or sleeve (51) made of a ferromagnetic material being arranged around the detection winding (50).

16. Electric valve device according to any one of the preceding claims, comprising a plurality of electric valves (A, B) substantially identical to each other, the valve bodies (6) of which are formed as a single body (2) and wherein a single cylindrical inlet conduit (3) is coupled to the valve chambers (7) of said electric valves (A, B) by means of an inlet manifold (23), said cylindrical inlet conduit (3) and said manifold (23) being made as one piece with the valve bodies (6) of said electric valves (A, B).



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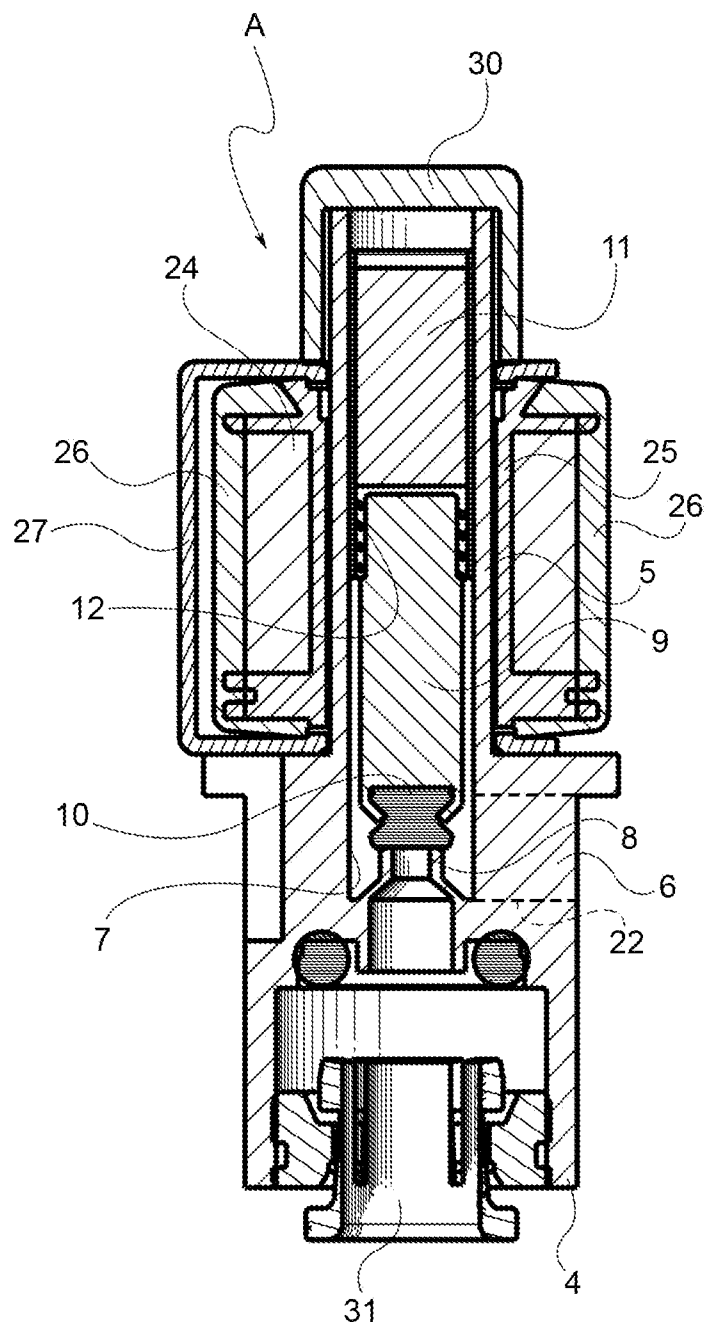


FIG. 2

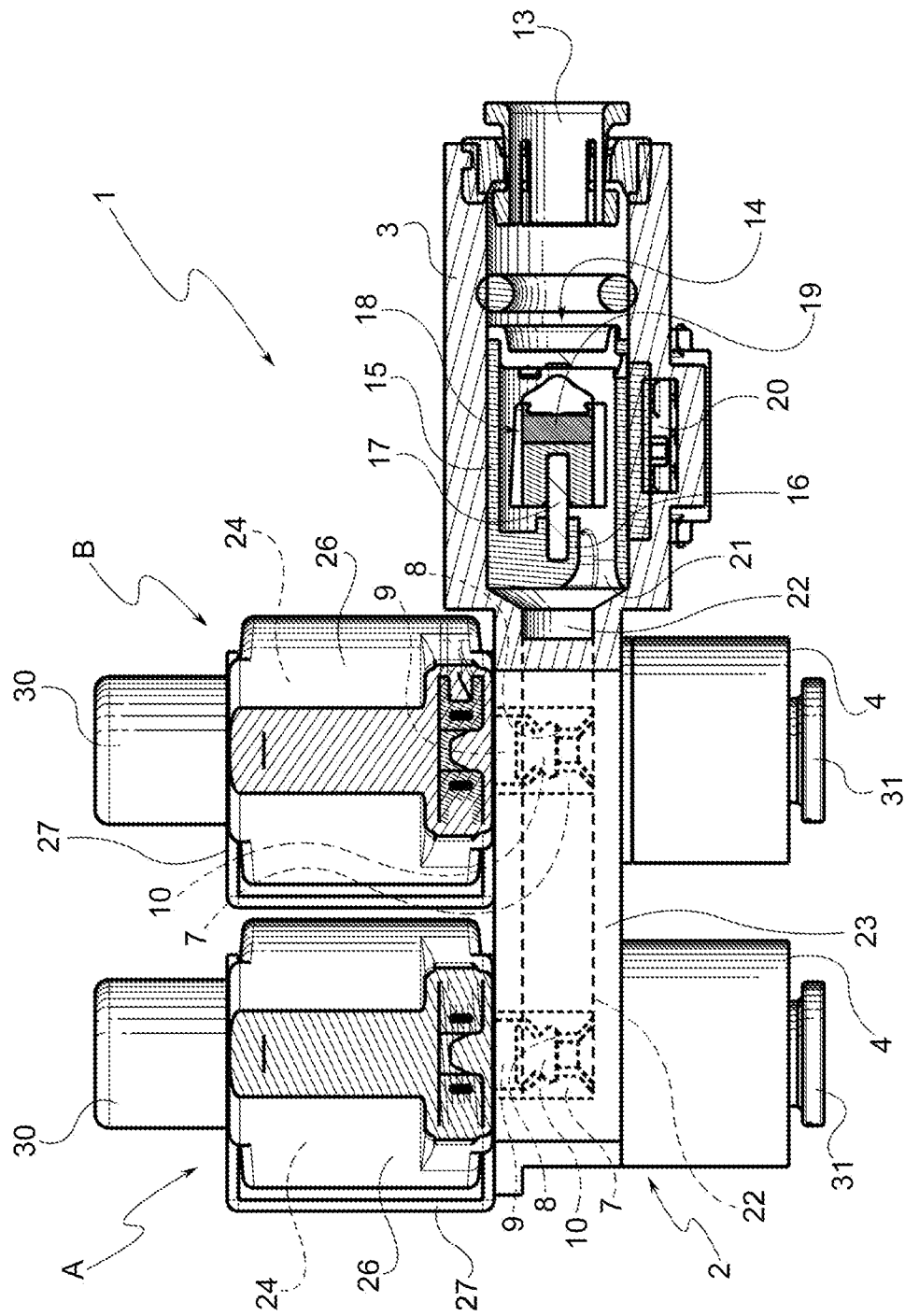


FIG. 3

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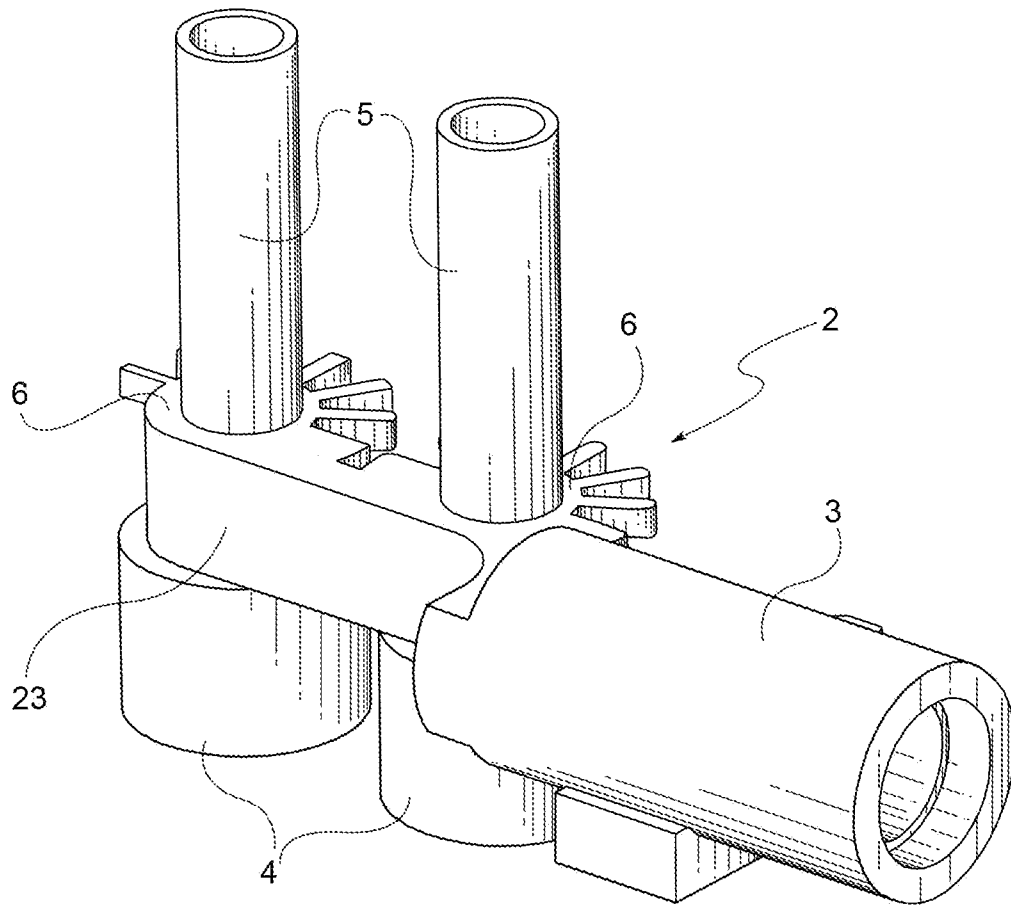


FIG. 4

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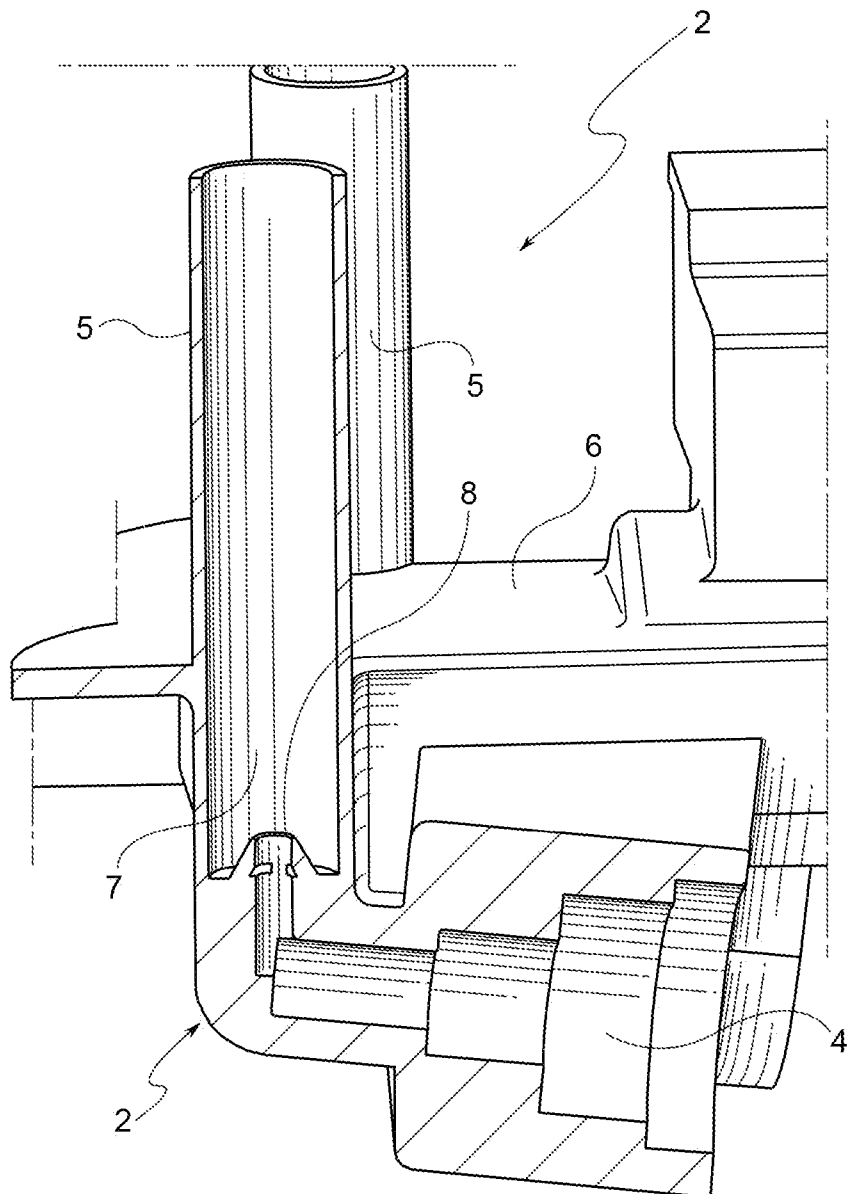
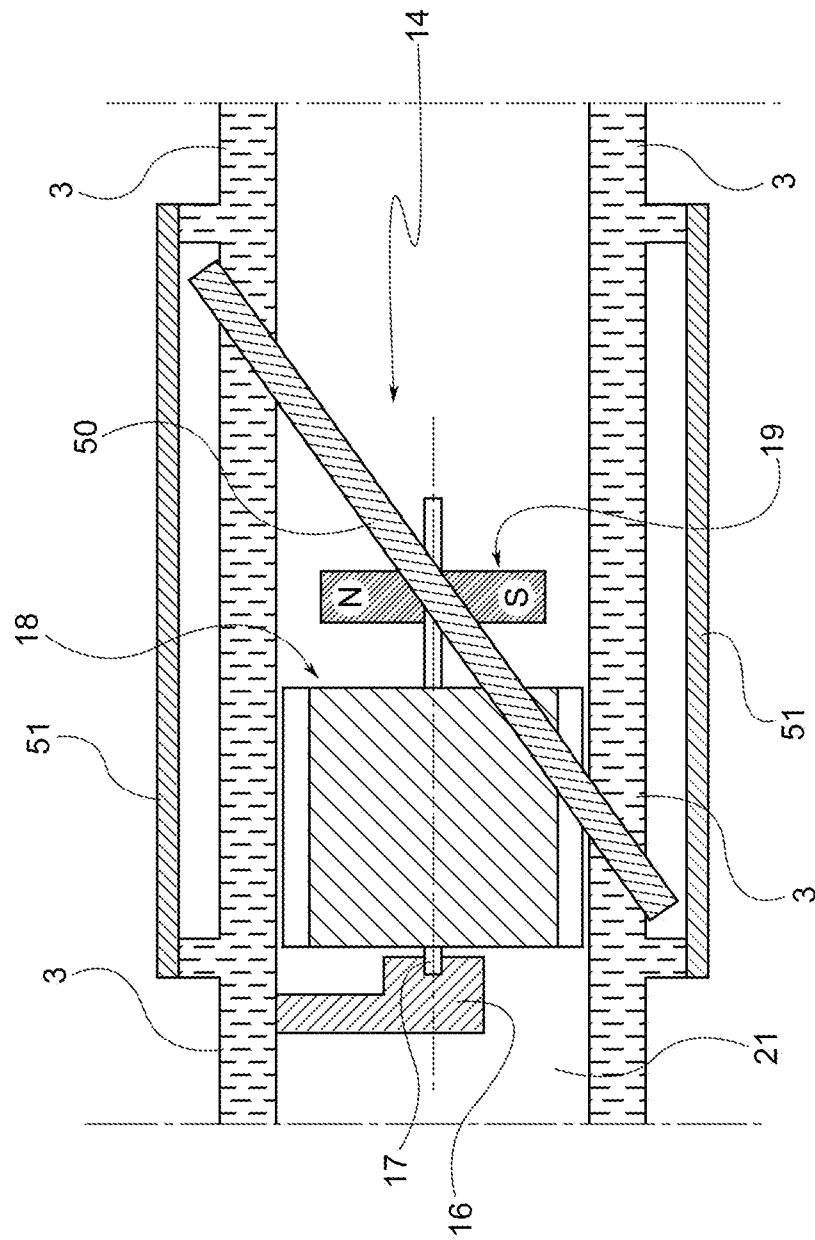


FIG. 5



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