

VALVE WITH ADJUSTABLE STOP

Cross-Reference to Related Applications

This application is claims the benefit of United States Provisional Application Nos. 60//452,772 and 60/481,904 filed March 7, 2003 and January 16, 2004, respectively, the entire disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

Background

Many diaphragm valves utilize pneumatic actuation to control whether the valve is opened or closed. A typical actuator contains one or more pistons that are coupled to a valve diaphragm to move the diaphragm against a valve seat to close the valve. Valves can be normally closed or normally opened. In a normally closed valve, a spring biases the piston and thus the diaphragm against the valve seat to maintain it closed. To open the valve, air pressure is fed into the actuator and acts on the piston face(s) such as to move the piston against the spring force. As the actuator piston moves, it disengages the diaphragm from the valve seat thereby opening the valve to flow. In prior art actuators, the piston is provided with additional travel distance to ensure that the actuator, and valve, is fully open. When evaluating a valve assembly for maximizing valve cycle life, a common failure occurs in the actuator. As such, it is desirable to provide an actuator that maximizes the cycle life of the valve assembly.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention is directed to an adjustable mechanism for limiting movement of a valve or actuator. The adjustable mechanism cooperates with one or more pistons to determine the axial distance the diaphragm will travel. By limiting the distance the piston(s) and diaphragm travel, the cycle life of the actuator is increased and the flow of the fluids within the valve can be regulated. For example, a trickle vale or a mixing valve can be formed. In addition, the stroke of the actuator can be set to match the stroke of the valve diaphragm, thereby preventing over-travel of the actuator piston or valve diaphragm. In some embodiments, the adjustable mechanism for limiting movement of a valve or actuator is accessible from the outside of the valve assembly, thereby avoiding the need to disassemble the valve assembly or any portion thereof to make adjustments.

These and other features and advantages of the invention will become apparent in the detailed description and claims to follow, taken in conjunction with the accompanying figures.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The invention may take physical form in certain parts and arrangements of parts, a preferred embodiment of which will be described in detail in this specification and illustrated in the accompanying drawings which form a part hereof, and wherein:

Fig. 1 is a cross-section view of a valve incorporating a first embodiment of the invention described herein;

Fig. 2 is a cross-sectional view of a valve incorporating a second embodiment of the invention described herein;

Fig. 3 is a cross-sectional view of a three-way valve incorporating the invention described herein;

Fig. 4 is a view of the flow path of the three-way valve in the first state;

Fig. 5. is a view of the flow path of the three-way valve in the second state;

Fig. 6 is a view of the flow path of the three-way valve in the third state, dividing a single flow;

Fig. 7 is a view of the flow path of the three-way valve in the third state, mixing two flows;

Fig. 8 is a cross-sectional view of an actuator incorporating a single set screw adjustable stop mechanism;

Fig. 9. is a cross-sectional view of an actuator incorporating an adjustable stop mechanism including two set screws;

Fig. 10 is a cross-sectional view of an actuator incorporating a one-piece port adjustable stop mechanism;

Fig. 11 is a cross-sectional view of an actuator incorporating a two-piece port adjustable stop mechanism;

Fig. 12 is a cross-sectional view of an actuator including a side pin for securing an adjustable end cap.

Description of the Invention

The present invention relates to valves for controlling fluid flow and is applicable to valves of different constructions. In addition, the present invention provides a mechanism for improving cycle life of an actuator through the stroke limitation of the actuator piston. The stroke limitation mechanism provides a positive stop, or other stroke limiting mechanism, for the actuator piston, thereby minimizing or eliminating piston over-travel and maximizing cycle life. The actuator piston stroke limitation also allows for proximity sensing, such as, for example, an

inductive proximity sensor, to be used. The stroke limitation aspects of the present invention allows the stroke to be set to a predetermined distance, such as the stroke that is required by the valve diaphragm. As such, an actuator with a larger stroke can be used with a valve with a smaller diaphragm stroke without over-travel of actuator piston or deformation of the valve diaphragm. The present invention also allows for precise and repeatable control of the flow of material through the valve by limiting the stroke to a desired position such that the valve is other than fully open.

Fig. 1 illustrates a valve 10 constructed in accordance with a first embodiment of the invention. The valve 10 includes a valve body or base 12. The valve base 12 defines a valve chamber 14 that is connected by first and second passages 16 and 18 to first and second ports 20 and 22, respectively, of the valve 10. The base 12 has a valve seat 26 that is located at the inner terminus of the second passage 18. A housing 24 is secured to the base 12 adjacent the valve chamber 14. Typically, fluid flows into the valve 10 through the first passage 18 and out through the second passage 16. The flow path through the valve 10 could be reversed when required in some applications. Additionally, as would be appreciated by one skilled in the art, the valve 10 can have other configurations and such valves can incorporate the adjustable stroke features described herein below. The invention is thus not limited to diaphragm valves.

A valve member 30 is disposed in the valve chamber 14. The valve member 30 can be of the flexible diaphragm type as shown, for example, in U.S. Patent No. 6,123,320, the entire disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference. The valve member 30 includes a flexible diaphragm 32. An outer peripheral portion 34 of the diaphragm 32 is captured between the valve base 12 and the valve housing 24. A stem portion 36 of the valve member 30 has a tip 38 that is engageable with the valve seat 26 to open and close the second passage 18.

The valve 10 includes a cylinder 40 that is partially defined by the housing 24. A piston 42 is supported in the cylinder 40 for sliding movement relative to the housing 24 along a longitudinal central axis 44 of the valve 10. The piston 42 has an end face 46 that is presented toward the valve chamber 14. An end portion 48 of the valve member 30 is threadedly secured to the piston 42, although other coupling mechanism can also be used.

The housing 24 has a pressurization port (not shown) through which air, or another fluid, under pressure can be admitted into the cylinder 40. Thus, the cylinder 40 can be pressurized so as to exert force on the end face 46 of the piston 42 in an upward direction as viewed in Fig. 1. A cap 50 is secured to the housing 24 opposite the valve base 12. The cap 50 closes the upper end of the cylinder 40. The cap 50 has an annular end wall 52 that forms a spring seat. The end wall 52 has a central opening 54 that is formed as a through hole in the cap 50.

A compression spring 56 is disposed in the valve 10 and acts between the spring seat 52 and the piston 42. The spring 56 biases the piston 42 in a direction toward the valve chamber 14, that is, in a downward direction as viewed in Fig. 1. As a result, the position of the piston 42 in the cylinder 40 is controlled by the interplay between the force of the spring 56, acting in a first direction on the piston 42, and the force of the fluid in the cylinder, acting in an opposite second direction on the piston 42. Because the valve member 30 is secured to the piston 42, the position of the valve member 30 in the valve chamber 14 is also controlled by the interplay between the force of the spring 56 and the opposing force of the fluid in the cylinder 40.

The valve 10 includes an adjuster 60. The adjuster 60 is a rod-like member that extends freely through the central opening 54 in the cap 50. An inner end portion 62 of the adjuster 60 is screwed into the piston 42. As a result, the adjuster 60 is fixed for axial movement with the piston 42 under the influence of forces applied by the spring 56 and by the fluid in the cylinder 40. An outer end portion 64 of the adjuster 60 projects through the central opening 54 of the cap 50. The outer end portion 64 is externally threaded. A lock nut assembly 66 is disposed on the adjuster 60. The lock nut assembly 66 includes a first lock nut 68 and a second lock nut 70. The first lock nut 68 is screwed on the outer end portion 64 of the adjuster 60 into a position in engagement with the end wall 52 of the cap 50. The second lock nut 70 is screwed on the adjuster 60 into a position in engagement with the first lock nut 68. This engagement locks the first lock nut 68 in position on the adjuster 60.

The valve 10 is actuated by admitting fluid under pressure to the cylinder 40. The fluid pressure acts on the piston end face 46 to move the piston 42 upward against the bias of the spring 56. As a result, the valve member 30 moves off the valve seat 26, opening the second passage 18 in the valve base 12. Fluid can flow between the first passage 16 and the second passage 18. When the fluid pressure in the cylinder 40 is released, the force of the spring 56 acts on the piston 42 to move the piston and the valve member 30 in a direction toward the valve seat 26. At this time, the position of the lock nut assembly 66 on the adjuster 60 controls the amount of closing of the valve 10. Specifically, the position of the lock nut assembly 66 on the adjuster 60 controls how far the adjuster 60 and thus the valve member 30 move in a direction toward the valve seat 26, thus setting the amount of closing of the valve 10.

The lock nut assembly 66 can be positioned on the adjuster 60 so that the first lock nut 68 does not engage the outer portion 53 end wall 52 of the cap 50 before the valve member 30 engages the valve seat 26. In this case, the valve 10 closes completely when the fluid pressure to the cylinder 40 is released, and fluid flow through the second passage 18 is blocked. Alternatively, the lock nut assembly 66 can be positioned on the adjuster 60 so that the first lock

nut 68 engages the outer portion 53 of the end wall 52 of the cap 50 before the valve member 30 engages the valve seat 26. In this case, the engagement of the first lock nut 68 with the outer portion 53 of the end wall 52 of the cap 50 prevents further movement of the adjuster 60, the piston 42, and the valve member 30 in the closing direction. As a result, the valve 10 is not closed fully when the fluid pressure to the cylinder 40 is released, and fluid flow through the second passage 18 is enabled. The position of the first lock nut 68 can be varied in order to set a predetermined or selectable flow rate through the second passage 18. For example, if the opening that remains between the valve member 30 and the valve seat 26 is small, a trickle flow of fluid through the valve 10 is enabled. The size of the opening can be varied by setting the lock nut assembly 66 at a different position on the adjuster 60. The first lock nut 68 acts as a stop to set how much fluid flow is enabled. The second lock nut 70 locks against the first lock nut 68 to keep the first lock nut from rotating. Although a threaded adjuster and nut are illustrated, non-threaded embodiments may alternatively be used.

Fig. 2 illustrates a valve 10a constructed in accordance with a second embodiment of the invention. The valve 10a is similar in construction to the valve 10 (Fig. 1). Parts of the valve 10a that are the same as or similar to corresponding parts of the valve 10 are given the same reference numerals with the suffix "a" attached.

The valve 10a includes a valve base 12a, a housing 24a, and a valve member 30a. The valve 10a also includes a cylinder 40a and a piston 42a supported in the cylinder for sliding movement relative to the housing 24a along a longitudinal central axis 44a of the valve. The valve member 30a is threadedly secured to the piston 42a. A cap 50a is secured to the housing 24a opposite the valve base 12a. The cap 50a closes the upper end of the cylinder 40a. The cap 50a has an annular end wall that has an internally threaded central opening 54a.

The valve 10a includes a spring seat 80. The spring seat 80 is formed as a separate member from the cap 50a and is movable relative to the cap 50a. The spring seat 80 has a generally disc-shaped configuration including a circular central opening 82. The central opening 82 is encircled by an annular, radially extending shoulder 84 that faces away from the piston 42a. An outer peripheral portion 86 of the spring seat 80 has a spring engagement surface 88 that faces toward the piston 42a. The position of the spring seat 80 relative to the cap 50a is controlled by an adjuster 60a. The adjuster 60a is a rod-like member that extends through the central opening 82 in the spring seat 80 and through the threaded central opening 54a in the cap 50a. An inner end portion 90 of the adjuster 60a is spaced apart from and movable relative to the piston 42a. The inner end portion 90 of the adjuster 60a includes an annular, radially extending

shoulder **92** that faces the valve chamber **14a**. The shoulder **92** on the adjuster **60a** engages the shoulder **84** on the spring seat **80**.

An outer end portion of the adjuster **60a** is externally threaded. The outer end portion **64a** is screwed into the threaded central opening **54a** of the cap **50a** and projects axially outward from the cap **50a**.

A single lock nut **68a** is disposed on the adjuster **60a**. The lock nut **68a** is threaded on the projecting outer end portion **64a** of the adjuster **60a** at a location adjacent the end wall **52a** of the cap **50**. The lock nut **68a** is screwed on the adjuster **60a** into a position in engagement with the outer portion **53a** of the end wall **52a** of the cap **50a**. Because the adjuster **60a** is screwed into the cap **50a**, the lock nut **68a** locks the adjuster in position in the valve **10a** and keeps the adjuster **60a** from rotating or from moving axially. Because the shoulder **90** on the adjuster **60a** engages the shoulder **84** on the spring seat **80**, the adjuster thereby controls and limits the axially outward movement of the spring seat **80**.

A compression spring **56a** is disposed in the cylinder **40a** in the valve **10a**. The spring **56a** acts between the piston **42a** and the spring engagement surface **88** of the spring seat **80**. The spring **56a** biases the piston **42a** in a direction toward the valve chamber **14a**, that is, in a downward direction as viewed in Fig. 2. As a result, the position of the piston **42a** in the cylinder **40a** and the position of the valve member **30a** in the valve chamber **14a** are controlled by the interplay between the force of the spring **56a** and the force of the fluid in the cylinder **40a**.

The valve **10a** is opened by admitting fluid under pressure to the cylinder **40a**. The fluid pressure acts on the piston end face **46a** to move the piston **42a** upward against the bias of the spring **56a**. As a result, the valve member **30a** moves off the valve seat **26a**, opening the second passage **18a** in the valve base **12a**. Fluid can flow between the first passage **16a** and the second passage **18a**. When the fluid pressure in the cylinder **40a** is released, the force of the spring **56a** acts on the piston **42a** to move the piston **42a** and the valve member **30a** in a direction toward the valve seat **26a**, closing the valve **10a**.

The position of the lock nut **68a** on the adjuster **60a** controls the position of the adjuster **60a** and the spring seat **80** relative to the cap **50a** and, thereby, controls the amount of spring force needed to open the valve **10a**. Specifically, the position of the lock nut **68a** on the adjuster **60a** controls how much the spring **56a** is compressed (the amount of spring preload) when the valve **10a** is in the closed position. The lock nut **68a** can be positioned on the adjuster **60a** so that the inner end portion **90a** of the adjuster **60a** projects by a relatively large amount into the cylinder **40a** in the valve **10a**. The shoulder **92** on the adjuster **60a** thus maintains the spring seat **80** in a position relatively far (axially inward) from the end wall **52a** of the cap **50a**. In this case,

the spring **56a** is compressed to a relatively great extent, and relatively more force is needed to open the valve **10a**. Alternatively, the lock nut **68a** can be positioned on the adjuster **60a** so that the inner end portion **90a** of the adjuster projects into the cylinder **40a** by a smaller amount. As a result, the shoulder **92** on the adjuster **60a** allows the spring seat **80** to assume a position located closer (axially outward) to the end wall **52a** of the cap **50a**. In this case, the spring **56a** is compressed to a lesser extent and the amount of force needed to open the valve **10a** is relatively less. By varying the position of the locking nut **68a**, the valve **10a** can be used with varying loads. This allows the valve **10a** to serve as a pressure relief valve, a blow-off valve, a water hammer surge-arrestor, or a pressure regulator.

Figs. 3-7 illustrate a valve **100** constructed in accordance with a third embodiment of the invention. The valve **100** (Fig. 3) includes a valve base **101**. The valve base **101** defines a first valve chamber **102** that is connected by a first passage **104** to a first port **106**. The valve base **101** defines a second valve chamber **108** that is connected by a second passage **110** to a second port **112**. The valve base **101** also defines a connecting passage **114** that extends between and connects the first valve chamber **102** in fluid communication with the second valve chamber **108**. The connecting passage **114** terminates in a first outlet opening **116** into the first valve chamber **102** and a second outlet opening **118** into the second valve chamber **108**. The first valve chamber **102** has a first valve seat **120** that extends around the first outlet opening **116** into the first valve chamber. The second valve chamber **108** has a second valve seat **122** that extends around the second outlet opening **118** into the second valve chamber. The second valve seat **122** faces in an opposite axial direction from the first valve seat **120**. The valve base **101** includes a third (or common) passage **124** that extends between connects the connecting passage **114** and a third port **126** (Figs. 4-7). The inner terminus of the third passage **124** is shown as a dashed circle in Fig. 3.

The valve **100** includes a first valve member **130** for selectively enabling or blocking fluid communication between the first passage **104** and the connector passage **114**. The first valve member **130** has a tip **132** engageable with the first valve seat **120** to block fluid flow between the first valve chamber **102** and the connector passage **114**. The valve **100** includes a second valve member **134** for selectively enabling or blocking fluid communication between the second passage **110** and the connector passage **114**. The second valve member **134** has a tip **136** engageable with the second valve seat **118** to block fluid flow between the second valve chamber **108** and the connector passage **114**.

A connector stem **140** extends through the connector passage **114** and fixes the first and second valve members **130** and **134** for movement with each other. Because the two valve seats **120** and **122** face in opposite directions, reciprocating movement of the connector stem **140** along

the axis 142 can cause one valve seat 120 to open when the other valve seat closes 122, and vice versa.

The valve 100 includes a housing 148 connected with the valve base 101 and a cap 150 connected with the housing. The cap 150 has an annular end wall 152 that forms a spring seat. The end wall 152 has an internally threaded central opening 154. The valve 100 also includes a cylinder 160 and a piston 162 supported in the cylinder for sliding movement relative to the housing 148 along the longitudinal central axis 142 of the valve. The first valve member 130 is threadedly secured to the piston 162. In some embodiments, the first and second valve members 130 and 134 can be separate pieces that are coupled together, such as by a threaded coupling. In other embodiments, the first and second valve members 130 and 134 can couple, such as by a threaded coupling, to a central stem portion. Furthermore, the first valve member 130 can be coupled to the piston in other, non-threaded, ways, such as, for example a clipping, a binding, or forming an interlocking engagement. As a result of the coupling to the piston, the first and second valve members 130 and 134, and the connector stem 140, are fixed to the piston 162 for movement with the piston 162. A compression spring 166 is disposed in the valve 100 and acts between a spring seat 152 formed by end wall 152 and the piston 162. The spring 166 biases the piston 162 in a direction toward the valve chambers 102 and 108, that is, in a downward direction as viewed in Fig. 3. As a result, the position of the piston 162 in the cylinder 160 is controlled by the interplay between the force of the spring 166, acting in a first direction on the piston 162, and the force of fluid in the cylinder 160, acting in an opposite second direction on the piston 162. Because the valve members 130 and 134 are secured to the piston 162, the position of the valve members is also controlled by the interplay between the force of the spring 166 and the opposing force of the fluid in the cylinder 160.

The valve 100 includes an adjuster 170. The adjuster 170 is a rod-like member having an inner end portion 172 that extends into the cylinder 160 and abuts the piston 162. An externally threaded outer end portion 174 of the adjuster 170 is screwed into the central opening 154 of the cap 150 and projects out of the cap. A lock nut 180 is threaded on the projecting outer end portion 174 of the adjuster 170 at a location adjacent the end wall 152 of the cap 150. The lock nut 180 is screwed on the adjuster 170 into a position in engagement with the end wall 152 of the cap 150. The lock nut 180 thereby prevents the adjuster 170 from rotating, and also sets the axial position of the adjuster in the valve 100.

The valve 100 is actuated by admitting fluid under pressure to the cylinder 160. The fluid pressure acts on the piston 162 to move the piston upward against the bias of the spring 166. When the fluid pressure in the cylinder 160 is released, the force of the spring 166 acts on the

piston to move the piston 162 in a direction toward the valve chambers 102 and 108 (downward as viewed in Fig. 3).

The valve 100 has two possible states or positions of operation. The valve 100 has a first state (not shown) in which the piston 162 is in a fully downward position under the influence of the spring 166. This position results when air pressure to the cylinder 160 is released. When the valve 100 is thus in the first state, the force of the spring 166 pushes the first valve member 134 into engagement with the first valve seat 120. Fluid flow is blocked between the first valve chamber 102 and the connector passage 114 and thus between the first passage 104 and the third passage 124. Fluid can not flow between the first port 106 and the second port 112 or the third port 126. At the same time, because the piston 162 is in a fully downward position, the second valve member 134 is off the second valve seat 122. Fluid can flow between the second valve chamber 108 and the connector passage 114 and thus between the second passage 110 and the third passage 124. The second port 112 and the third port 126 are, thereby, connected in fluid communication.

Fig. 4 illustrates a possible fluid flow pattern through the valve 100 when the valve is in the first state. Fluid can flow into the valve 100 through the third (common) port 126 and flow out of the valve through the second port 112.

The valve 100 has a second state in which the influence of the spring 166 does not move the piston 162 into the fully downward position. This second state results when air under pressure is provided to the cylinder 160 to overcome the force of the spring 166. The piston 162 moves upward in the cylinder 160. The moving piston 162 draws the first valve member 130 off the first valve seat 120, as shown in Fig. 3. As a result, fluid can flow between the first valve chamber 102 and the connector passage 114 and thus between the first passage 104 and the third passage 124. The first port 106 and the third port 126 are, thereby, connected in fluid communication. At the same time, the second valve member 134 is drawn toward the second valve seat 122. If the piston 162 moves upward sufficiently to cause the second valve member 134 to engage the second valve seat 122, fluid flow is blocked between the second valve chamber 108 and the connector passage 114 and thus between the second passage 110 and the third passage 124 and the first passage 104. So positioned, the second port 112 is thereby blocked from fluid communication with the third port 126 and the first port 106.

Fig. 5 illustrates a possible fluid flow pattern through the valve 100 when the valve is in this second state and the piston 162 moves upward sufficiently to close the second valve chamber 108. Fluid can flow into the valve 100 through the third (common) port 126 and flow out of the valve through the first port 106.

In order to achieve the second state wherein the second valve member 134 seals against the second valve seat 122, the adjuster 170 is set outward from the valve end wall 152. Such a setting of the adjuster 170 is accomplished by loosening the lock nut 180 and rotating the adjuster 170 relative to the cap 150 in a direction so as to have more of the adjuster project outward from the cap and less of the adjuster be disposed in the cylinder 160. The lock nut 180 is then tightened down again on the end wall 152 of the cap 150. When the valve 100 is actuated as described above, the inner end portion 172 of the adjuster 170 is relatively far away from the valve chambers 102 and 108 and therefore does not limit upward movement of the piston 162. Such upward movement does not cease until the second valve member 134 engages the second valve seat 122.

On the other hand, the adjuster 170 can be set so that it does limit upward movement of the piston 162. Such a setting of the adjuster 170 is accomplished by loosening the lock nut 180 and rotating the adjuster relative to the cap 150 in a direction so as to have less of the adjuster project outward from the cap and more of the adjuster be disposed in the cylinder 160. The lock nut 180 is then tightened down again on the end wall 152 of the cap 150. When the valve 100 is thereafter actuated with air pressure, the piston 162 moves upwardly only until it engages the inner end portion 172 of the adjuster 170, as shown in Fig. 3. The piston 162 does not move upward enough to cause the second valve member 134 to engage the second valve seat 122. Therefore, fluid flow is not blocked between the second valve chamber 108 and the connector passage 114, and thus is not blocked between the second passage 110 and the third passage 124 and the first passage 104. The second port 112 and the third port 126 and the first port 106 are, thereby, connected in fluid communication.

Figs. 6 and 7 illustrate possible fluid flow patterns through the valve 100 when the valve is between the first state and the second state. As illustrated in Fig. 6, fluid can flow into the valve 100 through the third (common) port 126 and flow out of the valve through both the first port 106 and the second port 112. In this manner, a single fluid flow can be split into two separate flows. Alternatively, as illustrated in Fig. 7, fluid can flow into the valve 100 through both the first port 106 and the second port 112 and flow out of the valve through the third (common) port 126. In this manner, the valve 100 acts as a mixing valve with two separate fluids being mixed together.

These flow patterns are created by positioning the adjuster 170 in between the position it is in when in the first state and that which it is in when it is in the second state. Such a setting of the adjuster 170 is accomplished by loosening the lock nut 180 and rotating the adjuster 170 relative to the cap 150. When the adjuster 170 is properly positioned, the lock nut 180 is

tightened and the valve **100** is in the third state. In order to determine the location of the adjuster **170** to achieve the first, second and third state, an indicator (not shown) can be provided. For example, the adjuster **170** can be color coded to demonstrate the three states, one color for each state. Additionally, the third state can be divided into relative mixing portions. For example, the indicator can have three colors for the third state, thus a total of five colors. The first color would indicate approximately a 25/75 mixture, the second color would indicate approximately a 50/50 mixture, and the third color would indicate approximately a 75/25 mixture. Alternatively, the indicator can be divided into further sections. The indicator can also use different means of indicating the relative position, such as, for example, numbers, bands or grooves.

Fig. 8 illustrates a fourth embodiment of the present invention and includes an actuator, generally referenced as **210**. The actuator **210** shown in Fig. 8 is a normally closed actuator, although one skilled in the art should appreciate that a normally open actuator can also be used. The actuator **210** includes an actuator housing **225**, one or more pistons **230**, a spring **240**, an inlet port **242** and end cap **243**. The spring **240** acts on the pistons **230** to maintain them in a downward position, so that engagement with the valve diaphragm **32** (see Fig. 1) will be maintained. Air enters through inlet port **242** and through flow channel **244** in the stem **245** of the upper piston **230a**. Air fills the upper actuation volume **248** and acts on the surface **249** of the upper piston **230a**. Air then continues through flow channel **251** in stem **252** of the lower piston **230b**. Air fills the lower actuation volume **254** and acts on the surface **255** of the lower piston **230b**. The air that fills the upper and lower actuation volumes **248** and **254** and acts on surfaces **249** and **255** causes the pistons **230** to move upward against the force of the spring **240**. Although Fig. 8 illustrates a multi-piston actuator assembly, one skilled in the art should appreciate that the present invention can be used with a single piston actuator. A static piston **260** is used to maintain air-pressure on the lower side of each actuating piston, and a stroke limiting mechanism **270** acts as a positive stop for the piston(s) **230a**. In Fig. 8, the stroke limiting mechanism **270** is a set screw **271**.

As the stem **245** repeatedly contacts the set screw **271**, the set screw may loosen. As such, a mechanism to secure the set screw **271** in position may be used to prevent loosening. Fig. 9 illustrates one embodiment, wherein a second set screw **272** is used to lock the first set screw **271** into position. In another embodiment, a locking material or glue such as, for example, locktite, is used to lock the set screw **271** into position. In another embodiment, the set screw **271** is locked into position through an interference fit. This can be achieved by changing the pitch of the threads to provide an interference fit. One skilled in the art should appreciate that

any convention means of providing an interference thread fit can be employed to secure the set screw in position.

In Fig. 10, a one-piece adjustable port **280** is used to provide the piston stroke limitation. The one-piece adjustable port **280** is threaded into the end cap **243**. The one-piece adjustable port **280** is comprised of a generally cylindrical shaft **282** with a counterbore **284** that receives the stem **245** of the upper piston **230a**. The cylindrical shaft **282** includes an end portion **247** that contacts raised step portion **249** of the piston **230**. This contact provides a positive stop for the piston **230**. The position of that the piston **230** is stopped can be varied depending on the adjustment of the cylindrical shaft **282**. If the stroke of the piston **230** is desired to be smaller, the cylindrical shaft **282** is adjusted such that the end portion **247** protrudes further into the actuator housing **225**, thereby providing contact with the raised portion **249** of the piston **230** with less axial movement of the piston. In other embodiments, a bridge **285** is disposed between the inlet port **242** and the counterbore **284**. The stem **245** contacts the bridge **285** when the actuator **210** is in the open position. This provides a positive stop for the actuator piston **230** thereby limiting the piston stroke. The bridge **285** can be used alone, or in connection with the raised portion **249** contact with the end portion **247** the cylindrical shaft **282**. The threaded engagement between the one-piece adjustable port **280** and the end cap **243** provides for a means of adjusting the stroke height. The threaded engagement between the actuator housing **225** and the end cap **243** may provide an additional means of adjusting the stroke height.

In Fig. 11, a two-piece adjustable port **290** is used to provide the piston stroke limitation. A threaded stroke limitation cap **295** is threaded into the end cap **243** at the end opposite of the inlet port **242**. The stroke limitation cap **295** is comprised of a generally cylindrical shaft **296** with a counterbore **297** that receives the stem **245** of the upper piston **230a**. A positive stop can be achieved by the contact between the end portion **247** of the cylindrical shaft **296** and the raised portion **249** of the piston **230**, or between the end **298** of the counterbore **297** and the stem **245**. The threaded engagement between the stroke limitation cap **295** and the end cap **243** provides for a means of adjusting the stroke height. The threaded engagement between the actuator housing **225** and the end cap **243** may provide an additional means of adjusting the stroke height.

In Fig. 12, an end cap **243'** with an integral stroke limiting mechanism **300** is shown. The end cap **243'** is threaded onto the actuator housing **225** and then secured in place by a lock nut or pin **302**. The stroke limiting mechanism **300** is comprised and end portion **247** of a shaft **300** that contacts a raised portion **249** of piston **230**. Alternatively, or in addition to the end portion stroke limitation, a bridge can be positioned at **306** that would separates the inlet port **242** from the counterbore **304** and provide a positive stop with the stem **243** of the piston **230**. When a bridge

is positioned at **306** is used, the stem **243** of the upper piston **230a** is received in the counterbore **304** and contacts the bridge to provide a positive stop for the upper piston **230a**. In each of these embodiments, the threaded engagement between the end cap **243'** and the actuator housing **225** provides for a means of adjusting the stroke height.

In each of the embodiments shown in Figs. 8-12, the stroke limitation mechanism **270** can provide a means for controlling the flow of material through the valve. The stroke limitation mechanism **270** can be adjusted such as to change the stroke height. In this manner, the flow of the material through the valve can be controlled. For example, if the stroke height was such that the valve diaphragm would be positioned to only half open the valve passageway, the actuator can be used to control the between normally open or normally closed and a half-open position. Furthermore, since the stroke height can be limited, proximity sensors can be used to determine the position of the actuator piston **230**. In the case of prior art actuators, the additional travel distance of the actuator piston frequently takes the piston out of the range of most conventional proximity sensors. The stroke limitation mechanisms disclosed herein limit the stroke height, and thereby allow the piston to remain within the range of conventional proximity sensors.

Through the adjustment of the stop mechanism, the stroke of an actuator can be set to a predetermined distance. For example, frequently an actuator with a stroke larger than the stroke of a valve diaphragm is used. In such cases, the actuator piston will travel a greater distance than is required to operate the valve. This over-travel wears on the piston and piston seals and may cause distortion of the diaphragm if the diaphragm is forced to travel a greater distance and it is designed for. By incorporating the stroke limitation mechanisms described herein, the actuator stroke can be set to the same distance as the valve diaphragm stroke. Furthermore, since these adjustments can be made from the outside of the valve assembly, the stroke can be adjusted without the disassembly of the valve assembly.

The invention has been described with reference to the preferred embodiment. Modifications and alterations will occur to others upon a reading and understanding of this specification. It is intended to include all such modifications and alterations insofar as they come within the scope of the appended claims or the equivalents thereof.

Claims

1. A valve comprising:
 - first and second ports and a flow path therebetween;
 - a valve seat formed about one of said ports;
 - a valve member that is selectively moved into and out of sealing engagement with said valve seat;
 - an actuator coupled to said valve member to move said valve member into and out of sealing engagement with said valve seat; and
 - an adjustable mechanism which cooperates with said actuator to determine the axial movement of the actuator and the valve member.
2. The valve of claim 1, wherein the adjustable mechanism includes an adjustor which is a rod-like member that threadably engages said actuator.
3. The valve of claim 1, wherein the adjustable mechanism includes is a stem located on the top portion of said actuator.
4. The valve of claim 1, wherein the adjustable mechanism includes a shaft that contacts a portion of the actuator.
5. The valve of claim 4, wherein said portion of said actuator is raised above a top surface of said actuator.
6. The valve of claim 2, wherein said adjustable mechanism comprises a first lock nut that is threadably engaged on said adjustor.
7. The valve of claim 6, wherein said first lock nut engages a portion of a valve housing when located on a first position of said adjustor, wherein said engagement with said valve housing prevents the valve member from engaging said valve seat.
8. The valve of claim 7 further comprising a second lock nut that engages said first lock nut to prevent rotation thereof.

9. The valve of claim 1, wherein said adjustable mechanism comprises a first set screw that threadably engages a portion of a valve housing.
10. The valve of claim 1 further comprising a second set screw that engages said first set screw to prevent rotation thereof.
11. The valve of claim 1, wherein said adjustable mechanism comprises a one-piece adjustable port that is threaded into a top portion of a valve housing.
12. The valve of claim 11, wherein said one-piece adjustable port comprises a shaft that engages a portion of said actuator.
13. The valve of claim 12, wherein said one-piece adjustable port engages said actuator to prevent the piston from moving in the axial direction.
14. The valve of claim 1, wherein said adjustable mechanism comprises a two-piece adjustable port that is threaded into a top portion of a valve housing.
15. The valve of claim 1 further comprising an end cap that is threaded onto a valve housing.
16. The valve of claim 15, wherein said end cap is selectively positioned to determine the axial movement of the actuator and valve member.
17. The valve of claim 1, wherein said adjustable mechanism is positioned to prevent said valve member from sealing against the valve seat when the valve is in a closed position.
18. A valve comprising:
 - three fluid ports, each having a fluid passageway;
 - a connecting fluid passageway wherein each of said port fluid passageways connect to said connecting fluid passageway;
 - a valve element including two sealing members, one sealing member which seals against a first valve seat located at a first end of said connecting fluid passageway when said valve element is in a first position and one sealing member which seals against a second valve seat

located at a second end of said connecting fluid passageway when said valve element is in a second position;

a piston connected to said valve element; and

an adjustable mechanism which is selectively positioned to determine the axial movement of the valve element.

19. The valve of claim 18, wherein when said valve element is in a third position, neither the first nor second sealing members seal against their respective valve seats.

20. A valve actuator including:

at least one piston contained within an actuator housing; and

an adjustable mechanism that selectively engages at least a portion of said at least one piston to selectively adjust axial movement of said at least one piston.

21. The valve actuator of claim 20, wherein said adjustable mechanism comprises one or more set screws.

22. The valve actuator of claim 20, wherein said adjustable mechanism is a one-piece port.

23. The valve actuator of claim 20, wherein said adjustable mechanism is a two-piece port.

24. The valve actuator of claim 20 further comprising an end cap threadably mounted to said actuator housing.

25. The valve actuator of claim 24, wherein said end cap can be selectively positioned to determine the axial movement of said one or more pistons.

26. The valve actuator of claim 24 further comprising a nut member that locks the end cap in position on said actuator housing.

27. A valve comprising:

at least two ports and fluid passageways therebetween;

a valve member that includes a portion that aligns with at least one of said ports to determine the flow through said fluid passageways;

a piston that cooperates with said valve member to selectively move said valve member axially towards and away from said at least one of said fluid passageways;

a means for preventing said portion of said valve member from sealing against said at least one of said fluid passageways thereby preventing flow through said at least one of said fluid passageways.

28. A valve comprising:

at least one port;

a valve element that includes a portion that aligns with said at least one port to control the flow therethrough;

a piston that cooperates with said valve element to selectively move said valve element axially towards and away from said at least one port;

a means for adjusting the force required to move said valve element away from said at least one port.

29. The valve of claim 28 wherein said means for adjusting the force required to move said valve element away from said at least one port comprises a spring and a spring engagement surface, wherein the position of said spring engagement surface can be adjusted axially to compress or allow expansion of said spring.

30. A valve comprising:

a diaphragm that is axially moved into and out of engagement with a valve seat;

a piston coupled with said diaphragm, said piston movable axially a total piston movement distance; and

a means for adjusting said total piston movement distance.

31. The valve of claim 30, wherein the total piston movement distance is less than the distance required to seal said diaphragm against said valve seat.

32. A valve comprising:

three or more fluid ports, each having a fluid passageway;

a connecting fluid passageway wherein each of said port fluid passageways flow;

a diaphragm element including two engagement members, a first engagement member which engages a first valve seat located at a first end of said connecting fluid passageway and a

second engagement member which engages a second valve seat located at a second end of said connecting fluid passageway; and

a piston connected to said diaphragm element and axially movable to selectively position said diaphragm member in a first position wherein said first engagement member engages said first valve seat, a second position wherein said second engagement member engages said second valve seat, or a third position between said first and second positions.

33. An actuator comprising:

a piston coupled to a valve member, said piston movable axially a total piston movement distance; and

a means for adjusting said total piston movement distance.

34. A valve assembly comprising:

an actuator having a stroke equal to a first distance;

a valve including a valve member that selectively engages at least one port to control flow through said valve, said valve member having a stroke equal to a second distance; and

a means for adjusting the stroke of said actuator.

35. The valve assembly of claim 34 wherein said first distance is greater than said second distance.

36. The valve assembly of claim 34 wherein said means for adjusting the stroke of said actuator is used to make said first distance substantially equal to said second distance.

37. The valve assembly of claim 34 wherein said means for adjusting the stroke of said actuator is accessible from an outside portion of said valve assembly.

38. A valve assembly comprising:

an actuator;

a valve including a valve member that selectively engages at least one port to control flow through said valve, said valve member being coupled to said actuator; and

an adjustment mechanism that controls an axial displacement of said actuator, wherein said adjustment mechanism is accessible from an outside portion of said valve assembly.

39. A valve assembly comprising:

three or more ports;

a valve member that selectively control flow between said three or more ports; and

an adjustment mechanism that controls the relative flow between said three or more ports.