

THE
PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW.

ON MECHANICAL EXPLANATION.

I. *On the Definition of the Mechanical Ideal.* — In philosophy and in science we are frequently called upon to face a certain hypothesis, — the hypothesis, namely, that all the phenomena of the world in which we live are susceptible of a mechanical explanation. In discussing method we are in the habit of referring to this point of view as the ‘mechanical ideal.’ Now we all feel that in a way we understand what is meant by the mechanical ideal, whether or not we are willing to entertain it, and yet it must be admitted that the literature of philosophy is much richer in instances of an instinctive application of this ideal than in examples of a serious effort to define its meaning. We feel no little confidence in our right to pronounce certain methods of explanation inharmonious with the ideal, but such exclusions still leave us in considerable doubt respecting the inclusion of the term.

For example, it would probably be admitted by all that a biologist who denied the possibility of finding among the physico-chemical conditions of an organism and its environment at any moment the determinants of the growth of the organism at that moment, would definitely have rejected the mechanical ideal. But, on the other hand, would the adoption of a physico-chemical theory of growth be equivalent to the acceptance of the ideal? At least, we can understand the eagerness of an Ostwald to replace the vague concept of “chemical affinity” with a picture whose details are wholly physical of the processes which are involved in neutralization, solution, and so forth. This sympathy