Some 30 years ago, the late Richard Rorty wrote a provocative book called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In that book, and in many subsequent books and essays, Rorty advanced the astonishing thesis that Platonism and philosophy are identical. The point of making this identification is the inference drawn from it: if you find Platonism unacceptable, then you ought to abandon philosophy or, to put it slightly less starkly, you ought to abandon philosophy as it has been practiced for some 2,500 years. This is not, of course, to say that those trained in philosophy have nothing to contribute to our culture or society. It is just that they have no specific knowledge to contribute. What I initially found so incredible about the thesis that Platonism and philosophy are identical is that almost all critics of Plato and Platonism, from Aristotle onwards, made their criticisms from a philosophical perspective. So, for example, to reject Plato’s Forms was to do so on the basis of another, putatively superior, account of predication. How, then, could Rorty maintain that the rejection of Platonism is necessarily at the same time the rejection of philosophy? Rorty’s insightful response to this question is that those who rejected Platonism did so from what we might term a Platonic perspective. That is, they shared with Plato fundamental principles, the questioning of which was never the starting-point of any objection. According to Rorty’s approach, Platonism should not, therefore, be identified with a philosophical position that is taken to follow from these principles, but with the principles themselves. Hence, a rejection of Platonism is really a rejection of the principles
shared by most philosophers up to the present. It is from these principles, Rorty thought, that numerous pernicious distinctions arose. As he puts it in the introduction to his collection of essays entitled *Philosophy and Social Hope*, ‘most of what I have written in the last decade consists of attempts to tie my social hopes—hopes for a global, cosmopolitan, democratic, egalitarian, classless, casteless society—with my antagonism towards Platonism’. By ‘Platonism’ Rorty means the ‘set of philosophical distinctions (appearance/reality, matter/mind, made/found, sensible/intellectual, etc.)’ that he thinks continue to bedevil the thinking of philosophers. Other important ‘Platonic dualisms elsewhere rejected by Rorty are: knowledge/belief, cognitional/volitional, and subject/object. These distinctions (among others) are the consequences inferred from the principles that together constitute Platonism.

In order to see the force of Rorty’s point, let us look at what, for Rorty, and now for many others, is the antithesis of Platonism, the position that amounts to the rejection *in toto* of the principles that constitute Platonism. The standard name for the polar opposite of Platonism is ‘naturalism’. Let me quote at some length from the exceptionally clear statement of a contemporary naturalist, Alex Rosenberg. In ‘Disenchanted Naturalism’ Rosenberg writes,

> Naturalism is the label for the thesis that the tools we should use in answering philosophical problems are the methods and findings of the mature sciences—from physics across to biology and increasingly neuroscience. It enables us to rule out answers to philosophical questions that are incompatible with scientific findings. It enables us to rule out epistemological pluralism—that the house of knowledge has many mansions, as well as skepticism about the reach of science. It bids us doubt that there are facts about reality that science cannot
grasp. It gives us confidence to assert that by now in the development of science, absence of evidence is *prima facie* good grounds for evidence of absence: this goes for God, and a great deal else.

I think naturalism is right, but I also think science forces upon us a very disillusioned “take” on reality. It forces us to say ‘No’ in response to many questions to which most everyone hopes the answers are ‘Yes.’ These are the questions about purpose in nature, the meaning of life, the grounds of morality, the significance of consciousness, the character of thought, the freedom of the will, the limits of human self-understanding, and the trajectory of human history. The negative answers to these questions that science provides are ones that most naturalists have sought to avoid, or at least qualify, reinterpret, or recast to avoid science’s harsh conclusions. I dissent from the consensus of these philosophers who have sought to reconcile science with common sense or the manifest image or the wisdom of our culture. My excuse is that I stand on the shoulders of giants: the many heroic naturalists who have tried vainly, I think, to find a more upbeat version of naturalism than this one.

Rosenberg is in broad agreement with Rorty about what anti-Platonism is, although it may be the case that Rosenberg would disagree with Rorty about the pre-eminence of the natural sciences. But the disagreements among naturalists or anti-Platonists are not my main topic; nor, for that matter, are the disagreements among Platonists. What I aim to show is that Rorty (and probably Rosenberg) are right in identifying Platonism with philosophy and that, therefore, the rejection of the one necessarily means the rejection of the other. But I also propose to argue for an even bolder thesis that this one. This is the thesis that most of the history of philosophy, especially
since the 17th century can be characterized as failed attempts by various Platonists to seek some rapprochement with naturalism and, mostly in the latter half of the 20th century and also now, similarly failed attempts by naturalists to incorporate into their worldviews some element or another of Platonism. I would like to show that what I am calling the elements of Platonism—to which I shall turn in a moment—are interconnected such that it is not possible to embrace one or another of these without embracing them all. In other words, Platonism (or philosophy) and naturalism are contradictory positions. Someone who recoils from naturalism burdens herself with all the elements of Platonism; conversely, someone who rejects one or another of these elements will find herself sooner rather than later in the naturalist’s camp, assuming, of course, that consistency is a desideratum. If I am right, the history of modern philosophy has been mostly the history of misguided attempts at compromise among Platonists and naturalists. They have been doomed efforts to ‘have one’s cake and eat it, too’.

In 2005, I published a book titled Aristotle and Other Platonists in which I argued that Platonists in late antiquity were largely correct in holding that Aristotle’s philosophy was in harmony with Plato’s. One justified criticism of that book was that I simply assumed that the definition of ‘Platonism’ more or less adhered to by later Platonists was correct and that this definition could not be used to characterize the philosophy of Plato. In my most recent book, From Plato to Platonism (2013), I sought to show that, quite apart from the perspective of later Platonists or, to use the pejorative term ‘Neoplatonists’, Plato was indeed, himself a Platonist. But to do this, I had to ask the obvious question of how one could arrive at a non question-begging definition of Plato’s philosophy or at least of his philosophical principles. The strategy I employed was to follow a sort of via negativa, examining the dialogues for the philosophical positions that are therein totally and consistently rejected. The ‘consistently rejected’ part is
important because many would maintain that the difficulty in determining Plato’s philosophy is in part that his views changed over the course of the dialogues. So, we hear about the early, middle, and late Plato, terms of periodization that, we should never forget, are entirely fictitious. The apotheosis of such fictional construction is the hermeneutic version of an astronomical epicycle, the ‘transition’ dialogue, supposedly including those works which do not fit neatly into the early, middle, or late categories.

Here I briefly sketch a hypothetical reconstruction of what I shall call ‘Ur-Platonism’ (UP). This is the general philosophical position that arises from the conjunction of the negations of the philosophical positions explicitly rejected in the dialogues, that is, the philosophical positions on offer in the history of philosophy accessible to Plato himself. It is well known that Plato in the dialogues engages with most of the philosophers who preceded him. Some of these, like Parmenides and Protagoras, exercise his intellect more than others, including probably some unnamed ones as well as some unknown to us. All of these philosophers, with the exception of Socrates and Pythagoras, are represented as holding views that are firmly rejected in the dialogues either explicitly or implicitly. It matters little for my purpose if Plato misrepresented or misunderstood some of these philosophers, though I do assume that he did neither of these things. I am not claiming that anyone, including Plato, simply embraced UP. I am, however, claiming that Platonism in general can be seen to arise out of the matrix of UP, and that Plato’s philosophy is actually one version of Platonism, as odd as this may sound. So, in a manner of speaking, UP is a via negativa to Plato’s philosophy. To be a Platonist is, minimally, to have a commitment to UP. It is only a slight step further to recognize that this basic commitment is virtually always in fact conjoined with a commitment to discover the most consistent integrated positive metaphysical construct on the basis of UP. Disagreements among these same Platonists
are, I believe, best explained by the fact that this systematic construct does not decisively
determine the correct answer to many specific philosophical problems raised especially by
opponents of Platonism. That is, UP is largely underdetermining for some specific philosophical
doctrines or answers to specific philosophical questions.

The elements of UP according to my hypothesis are: anti-materialism, anti-mechanism,
anti-nominalism, anti-relativism, and anti-scepticism. Here is a rough sketch of these elements.

Anti-materialism is the view that it is false that the only things that exist are bodies and
their properties. Thus, to admit that the surface of a body is obviously not a body itself is not
thereby to deny materialism. The anti-materialist maintains that there are entities that exist that
are not bodies and that exist independently of bodies. Thus, for the anti-materialist, the question
‘is the soul a body or a property of a body?’ is not a question with an obvious answer since it is
possible that the answer is ‘no’. The further question of how an immaterial soul might be related
to a body belongs, of course, to the substance of the positive response to UP, or to one or another
version of Platonism.

Anti-mechanism is the view that the only sort of explanations available in principle to a
materialist are inadequate for explaining the natural order. What, then, distinguishes materialism
from mechanism? It would be possible to be an anti-materialist yet still believe that all
explanations are mechanical. Such might be the position of an occasionalist. Conversely, it
would be possible to believe that materialism is true, but also maintain that there are non-
mechanical explanations of some sort, say, at the quantum level. Anti-mechanism, though,
seems to be derived from anti-materialism. That is, having rejected the view that everything that
exists is a body or an attribute of a body, the way is open to propose non-bodily explanations for
bodily or material phenomena. One way to understand anti-mechanism is as the denial of one
version of what we have come to call ‘the causal closure principle’, that is, the principle that physical or material causes are necessary and sufficient for all events in the physical world. Although contemporary denials of this principle are generally focused on supposed mental events having at least no sufficient physical causes, anti-mechanism takes the stronger position that even admittedly physical events are not comprehensively accounted for by physical causes.

An anti-mechanist in antiquity generally relies on the principle that an ultimate or adequate explanation for a phenomenon must be a different sort of thing from that which is in need of an explanation. Thus, the principle of number, one, is not a number. Accordingly, one might argue that since the properties of bodies are not bodies, there is nothing in principle amiss in using bodies for accounting for these properties. Helen’s beauty, say, is accounted for by her body, perhaps by emerging from or supervening on it. In order to make this work, and to remain within the confines of the principle that that which explains must be different from that which is explained, it is necessary to maintain that the body itself, and not other properties of the body, is the explanation for the beauty. If it were other properties, then the original principle would be violated. But of course this way leads to shipwreck. For we either continue to explain properties by properties or we explain properties by bodies, but since the bodies are only differentiated by their properties, the explanation for Helen’s beauty will be the same sort of explanation as the explanation for, say, Socrates’ virtue. Anti-mechanism and anti-materialism are distinct views, though within the versions of Platonism that arise from UP, they are always held to be mutually supporting. Along with anti-materialism, the exploration of the nature of explanation in an anti-mechanist framework belongs to a positive construct on the basis of UP.

Anti-nominalism is the view that it is false that the only things that exist are individuals, each uniquely situated in space and time. Nominalism can be local or general; denying the
existence of anything other than individuals within one kind of thing or denying their existence generally. It can also be extreme, by denying that there can even be a multiplicity of individuals, since each one would necessarily be the same as each other in virtue of the fact that it is one.

The anti-nominalist thus allows that two or more individuals can be the same and still be unique individuals. He thus allows ‘conceptual space’ for sameness that is not identity. By contrast, the nominalist maintains that if two things are the same, then they are identical; if two things are not identical, they cannot be the same. An anti-nominalist could insist on the reality of the phenomenon of sameness in difference and yet deny that there is an explanation for this, claiming rather that it is just a brute fact. Platonists generally associate the acceptance of the phenomenon with at least the possibility of giving a substantive causal explanation for it.

Anti-relativism is the denial of the claim that Plato attributes to Protagoras that ‘man is the measure of all things, of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not’. The claim is expressed in two forms in the dialogues: one epistemological and one ethical. Epistemological relativism is not scepticism; hence, the denial of this form of relativism is not a denial of scepticism. One may, after all, be sceptical of the possibility of acquiring knowledge about properties that may well be objective. Relativism is the view that ‘true’ just means ‘true for me’ or ‘what appears true to me’ or ‘true for some particular group’. The ethical form of relativism maintains that ‘good’ just means ‘good for me’ or ‘good for the group’ where good is determined by or constituted by a mental state or states, roughly, pleasure broadly conceived. Thus, ethical relativism is virtually hedonism in some variety. The denial of ethical relativism—individual or social—holds that what is good is determinable independently not of what is good for someone, but of what appears to that person as good for him. Thus, the anti-relativist can maintain that ‘good’ is the same as ‘good for x’ so long as she insists that ‘good for x’ is not equivalent to
what x claims is good for x. A similar point can be made about epistemological relativism. An alternative way of expressing ethical anti-relativism is to maintain that goodness is a property of being; for epistemological anti-relativism, the analogue is: truth is a property of being. More precisely, they are properties of οὐσία, whereas the Good itself transcends οὐσία or being but is the source of truth and goodness in being.

Anti-scepticism is the view that knowledge is possible. Knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) refers to a mode of cognition wherein the real is in some way ‘present’ to the cognizer. The sceptic does not maintain that cognition generally is impossible, but only that knowledge is. According to the argument we get in the dialogues, if either materialism or nominalism were true, scepticism would follow because it would not be possible for the real to be present to any cognizer; there could only be representations of some sort of the real, representations whose accuracy would be indeterminable. Throughout the dialogues, Plato has Socrates rail against sophists, rhetoriticians, and assorted demagogues who share at best a cavalier attitude towards the need for knowledge of any sort. Plato’s anti-scepticism assumes the legitimacy of such attacks.

What for Plato ties all the elements of UP together is a positive metaphysical construction the focus of which is a first principle of all, the Idea of the Good. According to Aristotle’s testimony, this principle was identified by Plato with the One which, together with the Indefinite Dyad, produced the whole array of intelligible reality. I am not here concerned either with Aristotle’s testimony on this score or with issues like the identification of Forms with Ideal Numbers, presumably the reason for the introduction of the Indefinite Dyad along with the One. So, I am simply going to refer to an absolutely first principle of all. To this must be added the Forms—however we construct their extent, nature, and relations—and what Plato calls a divine
mind, the Demiurge, whose explanatory role in producing a *kosmos* out of chaos is explicit in *Timaeus, Philebus*, and *Laws*.

The positive construct that is Plato’s Platonism connects the elements of UP. Thus, this positive construct needs to be deployed to explain the insufficiency of nominalism, mechanism, materialism, scepticism, and relativism in accounting for any of the phenomena that have comprised the problem set for the history of philosophy. For example, Plato in *Phaedo* criticizes Anaxagoras for being unable to account for the simple possession of properties by sensible things. For this, Forms are needed. But to posit Forms is to abandon materialism. And, again, in *Phaedo*, our ability to discern the diminished instantiations of Forms requires that we must have had knowledge of them, in which case scepticism goes by the boards. By ‘diminished instantiations’ I mean the fact that ‘equals’ though they be equal, leave something out in relation to the Form of Equality. Our awareness of this would not be possible if we were not able to compare the instance with the paradigm, previously known. Of course, we must add that the mere fact that we can recognize things as having properties, albeit having them deficiently, depends on the falsity of nominalism.

Here is another example. The ‘canonical’ refutation of Protagoras’s relativism is in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, but in *Republic* we have the portentous claim (repeated by Aristotle) that, though people are universally willing to accept the apparently beautiful or even the apparently just, no one without exception is willing to accept the apparently good. Everyone wants the real thing. The ‘real thing’ means objectively real. But, of course, what is really good differs as does being; different kinds of things are really good for different individuals or groups. That is why the reality of goodness requires the superordination of the Idea of the Good which is the cause of the being of everything else.
Platonism is essentially a top-down metaphysics. That is to say, all top-down metaphysical theories are versions of Platonism. By this I mean, roughly, that starting from the variegated being of the natural world, the principles for understanding that being must be supernatural in the sense that a principle must be other than the sort of thing it is a principle of. And insofar as such supernatural principles must ultimately be adduced for the solution to problems that are not ‘internally’ solvable according to natural principles, supervenient or epiphenomenal properties can have no explanatory force. Thus, for example, whereas we can give a satisfactory explanation of natural phenomena given physical laws, either the existence of the laws remain unexplained or, if the laws are supposed to be generalizations from the behavior of things in nature, these behavioral properties (or at least some of them) are not explained as supervenient upon the nature of the things that have them.

It should be fairly clear from the above account of UP why I think that Aristotle’s philosophy is one version of Platonism. It is easy to show that Aristotle unequivocally endorses the five ‘anti’s’ I have described above. It is also obvious that Aristotle sees the need for a unifying first principle to draw together the positive elements of Platonism. What later Platonists thought was not that Aristotle missed this crucial point but that he simply misidentified the nature of the first principle. In calling it an Unmoved Mover and characterizing it as ‘thinking thinking about thinking’, he failed to see that thinking is essentially intentional and that for this reason alone his first principle could not escape the complexity found in thinking plus an object of thinking. In other words, the absolute simplicity of the first principle of all precluded thinking from being that principle. In addition, Aristotle erred in his hypothesis that the primary referent of ‘being’ is ousia. The main reason for this is that ousia or essence or ‘whatness’ is distinct
from the existence of that essence, in which case complexity is once again introduced. So, Aristotle was in fact a dissident Platonist, but a Platonist after all.

In antiquity, the principal naturalists or diametrical opponents of Platonists were Atomists like Democritus, and their latter day disciples like Epicurus. The naturalists tried to accommodate Platonism by accepting the possibility of knowledge, something that Plato had argued in *Timaeus* is impossible on the assumption of the truth of materialism. The Stoics provide an especially interesting and complex case, for they were the first to attempt a kind of fusion or syncretism of Platonism and naturalism. Perhaps the most striking feature of this syncretism is the attempt to combine mechanism and materialism with teleology, something that later Platonists saw as impossible. That is, what grounds teleology is an immaterial superordinate Good. With the introduction of the explanatory role of this principle, the Stoic mechanist’s causal closure is defeated.

What is true for Aristotle is equally true for Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and so on and on. All of these were Platonists, but beginning with Descartes, various attempts to accommodate naturalistic principles were made. I can here only hint at some of the sorts of compromises made. One large area within which some of these compromises were made arose from the ‘new’ 17th century mechanistic physics. Thus, despite a commitment to anti-materialism, a concession to causal closure tended to marginalize the causal scope of the immaterial and, generally, the cogency or relevance of a top-down metaphysics. The very idea of empirical knowledge, constructed as a sort of peace-offering by Platonists to empirical science, eventually produced an unexpected result: anti-realism in science. This is not surprising from an historical perspective. For the criteria for empirical knowledge are, in fact, as Roderick Chisholm noted, copied from Academic Sceptics who denied one element of UP,
namely, anti-scepticism. But as the Pyrrhonian Sceptics saw so clearly, to deny the possibility of knowledge in exactly the sense in which Plato and all other Platonists understood it, is to be led to deny the possibility of rational belief. For what makes rational belief rational is evidence the cogency of which depends on the necessary intelligible connections that are, for Plato, the objects of knowledge. But the loosening of the connections between anti-scepticism and anti-mechanism among the self-declared proponents of a top-down metaphysics was, inevitably it seemed, to undermine the other elements of UP, namely, anti-relativism, anti-materialism, and anti-nominalism.

Starting in the middle of the 20th century—and here one might as well name Wilfred Quine as the doyen of modern naturalism, so long as we remember that David Hume is the godfather—naturalists began making analogous accommodations with Platonists. One sort of accommodation, which is actually quite a bit older, found in Francis Bacon, for example, is to acknowledge anti-materialism, but to isolate the immaterial in such a way that it is causally impotent. Fideism is one version of such a strategy. Another evidently appealing and certainly widespread sort of accommodation is to try to incorporate anti-relativism into a largely naturalistic worldview. A clear example of this is an attempt to prize natural law from its anti-materialistic foundation and to graft it onto an evolutionary account of the distinctively human. A more recent effort is found among naturalists who betray their naturalistic orthodoxy by claiming that the phenomena of consciousness and intentionality cannot be given naturalistic explanations, or at least cannot be given explanations based on current versions of naturalism. But rather than embracing anti-materialism and (perhaps) all that that entails, it is stipulated that these phenomena comprise a sort of secular mystery. The recent book by Thomas Nagel, *Mind*
and Cosmos, is a stellar example of discomfited naturalism. Galen Strawson recently, with admirable forthrightness, called such compromisers ‘false naturalists’.

Nagel fervently wants to retain his naturalist credentials. Perhaps the reason for his not abandoning naturalism for Platonism is that he believes that the only viable versions of Platonism are today forms of Christianity. There is some truth in this. Alvin Plantinga’s recent book Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism is a defense of Platonism under the guise of a specific version of Platonism, that of Christianity, or even more specifically, that of Dutch Calvinism. It is not so surprising that Nagel believes that his anomalous naturalism is preferable to what he regards as the only possible alternative. And even more recent example is found in Lynn Baker’s new book, Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective, in which Baker tries to defend a position on subjectivity that is, as she insists, ‘near naturalism’. Examples of naturalists who, while not exactly making any explicit concessions to Platonism, recoil from the uncompromising naturalism of Rosenberg, are legion. What they seem to have in common over against the rigorists is a reluctance to dismiss certain phenomena the explanations for which are not obviously susceptible to scientific methodology.

2.

If my hypothesis about the elements of UP and the rough outline of the positive construct that arises out of that matrix is correct; and again, if my claim that all the elements are mutually entailing as, of course, are their contradictories, we could pick up the thread of the confrontation of Platonism and naturalism almost anywhere. That is, we could start with just about any contemporary philosophical problem and try to show how either a consistent naturalist or a
consistent Platonist would answer that problem and then we could go on to show that the answers of compromised Platonists and compromised naturalists are inadequate. Needless to say, more than half way through this paper, I am in no position to offer anything like a comprehensive account of the competing positions with regard to even one issue. What I shall try to do, however, in the space remaining to me is to range rather widely over the ancient Platonists in order to sketch their responses to the most prominent ancient naturalists, most of whom actually maintained some watered-down version of naturalism.

As I mentioned in my discussion of Ur-Platonism above, the elements of Plato’s anti-naturalism are anti-nominalism, anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-relativism, and anti-scepticism. Each of these ‘antis’ is the conclusion of an argument against a specific opponent or a specific school of opponents. In the light of this opposition, Plato’s positive construct posits as first principle of all, the Idea of Good. Iris Murdoch felicitously wrote about this as ‘the sovereignty of Good’. All Platonists start from such a principle, variously named and variously analyzed. What Plato saw and what later Platonists exhaustively argued was that the good that everything seeks must be the identical principle from which everything comes. This was expressed as the principle *bonum est diffusivum sui* or ‘goodness is self-diffusive’. The argument that the Good at which all things aim is identical with the Good from which all things come depends upon the claim that the latter is not just the source of goodness but also the source of being, which is, of course, just what Plato says. The argument that there must be some ultimate source of being amounts to a sort of cosmological argument from the contingent to the necessary or, among some Platonists, from the complex to the absolutely simple. The argument that this source of being must be the Good, too, is basically that goodness is a property of being so that that which is the source of being and being’s properties must be perfectly good, assuming
the principle that the cause must have within it all its effects. Everything desires the Good means that everything desires fullness of being. Later Platonists criticized Aristotle because, though he recognized the sovereignty of good, and though he recognized the identification of the primary referent of ‘being’ with that good, he mischaracterized this principle as an intellect or rather as thinking, thinking about thinking. This misidentification prevents him from appreciating the diffusiveness of goodness, or at least fully appreciating it.

Naturally if we can establish the Good as the first principle of all much of naturalism crumbles. But not all, and not immediately. And it is important to insist on this if I am right that all of the elements of Platonism and all of the counter-elements of naturalism are mutually entailing. So, though relativism, materialism and mechanism must go by the boards, it is not clear that this is also the case for scepticism and nominalism. Indeed, one historically important attempt by a Platonist to make a compromise with the nominalism of naturalism is William of Ockham. And though attempts by Platonists to accommodate scepticism—especially radical, Pyrrhonian scepticism— are few and far between, there are many Platonists who, in embracing empirical knowledge as the *ne plus ultra* of cognition have certainly provided aid and comfort to naturalists who, like Richard Rorty, did not have a difficult time in showing that what counts as empirical knowledge differs only in degree and not in kind from any other sort of naturalistically explicable form of cognition.

As I briefly alluded to above, Plato does himself have an argument against scepticism and nominalism. But the issue only begins to be extensively thematized in Aristotle and beyond. Aristotle, especially in his *De Anima*, argues that thinking in general, which includes knowledge as one kind of thinking, cannot be a property of a body, it cannot, as he puts it, ‘be blended with a body’. This is because in thinking the intelligible object or form in present in the intellect and
thinking itself is the identification of the intellect with this intelligible. Among other things, this means that literally you could not think if materialism is true. Thinking is not, as Aristotle says that some maintain, something that is in principle just like sensing or perceiving. This is because thinking is a universalizing activity. This is what this means: when you think you see—mentally see—a form which could not in principle be identical with a particular, including a particular neurological element, a circuit or a state of a circuit or a synapse, and so on. This is so because the object of thinking is universal, or the mind is operating universally. For example, when you think ‘equals taken from equals are equal’ this is a perfectly universal truth which you see when you think it. But this truth, since it is universal could not be identical with any particular, any material particular located in space and time. The fact that in thinking you mind is identical with the form that it thinks means, for Aristotle, and for all Platonists, that since the form thought is detached from matter and so in principle immaterial, mind is immaterial, too. By the way, Nagel is troubled by this argument about thinking, but his ideological adherence to naturalism forbids him from countenancing the Platonic point that one has to embrace anti-materialism to explain thinking.

This point about the immateriality of mind is the basis for the rejection of both nominalism and scepticism. For nominalism holds that only particulars exist and the very existence of thinking belies this claim. In reply to the objection that computers can think and that this fact hardly refutes nominalism, the Platonist replies that rule-following is not thinking; indeed, we can follows rules, too, both unthinkingly and with thought. If this claim seems elusive or unwarranted, one might consider that a thermostat or even a humble flush toilet or, in fact, any feedback mechanism follows rules, though it would never occurs to anyone with even a minimal grasp on reality that they are therefore thinking. As for scepticism, the possibility of
knowledge follows from the condition for the possibility of thinking, namely, the immateriality of mind. The argument for this is slightly different and for it I turn to its most forceful exponent, Plotinus.

Plotinus attacked Stoic naturalists for their materialism. He argued that the Stoics could not consistently maintain, as they wanted to, that knowledge is an infallible mental state. The reason for this is that there could be no infallibility in knowledge understood as a state of a body. That was Aristotle’s point. More particularly, if knowledge were a property or state of a body or body part, then knowledge would be unavoidably representational. That is, the state would have to consist in a representation of the object of knowledge rather than being identical with it. What does this have to do with scepticism? Sextus Empiricus, chronicler of scepticism and Pyrrhonist, saw with crystal clarity that all ‘dogmatists’, including, of course, the Platonists, must insist on the infallibility of knowledge. And, as Sextus proclaims in his marvelous anticipation of Rorty’s point, if we can defeat the dogmatists’ pretensions to knowledge, then we can defeat philosophy altogether.

The reason for this near universal agreement is that to allow the possibility of fallible knowledge is to conflate knowledge and belief. For if a claim to knowledge is defeasible, then that claim does not differ from a belief which may happen to be true, but then again, may turn out to be false. As Plato argued in Theaetetus, knowledge cannot be true belief. The reason for this is that a true belief may be adventitiously true, say, a lucky guess. No one in antiquity thought there was no difference between a lucky guess and the knowledge that is wisdom, the ardently sought and presumably precious goal of philosophy. But what differentiates true belief from knowledge? Presumably, it is evidence or sufficient evidence or adequate evidence, in short, some sort of logos in virtue of which one can claim to know. The problem with this, as the
skeptics realized, is that the putative evidence rarely if ever guarantees what it is supposedly
evidence for. But what, then, gives non-entailing evidence its evidential character? Indeed, if
the supposed evidence does not guarantee what it is evidence for, then, once again, what is the
difference between a belief that is based on bad or no evidence and knowledge based on non-
entailing evidence? The skeptics—above all Sextus Empiricus—focused on the vulnerability of
the claim that one could have non-entailing evidence. If this is a chimera, then in fact there is no
difference between knowledge and a random belief, in which case, one ought to suspend
judgment or withhold assent to any proposition since there is no more reason to believe it than its
contradictory.

If, argues Plotinus, knowledge is not infallible, then there is no difference between
knowledge and irrational belief, which is to say that there is no such thing as knowledge. This is
of course unacceptable to a Platonist such as Plotinus. The Stoics, owing to their materialism,
and despite their wish to endorse the infallibility of knowledge, are completely unequipped to
meet the skeptical challenge, a challenge which was—at least in its Academic incarnation—
aimed at them. As Plotinus puts it, for the Stoics the putative evidence for their knowledge
claims must consist in ‘impressions’ (tupoi). These are, of course, physical events or states.
Plotinus asks of the Stoics the same question that the skeptics do: ‘how will the soul know that it
has really grasped what the impression is an impression of’. In other words, the real criterion is
not the presentation or the proposition supposedly representing the truth, but the truth itself.
What guarantees that so-and-so is the case is just this, not a representation of it? So, if
knowledge must be infallible, knowledge must be non-representational. But though a body
might be able to be in a non-representational state regarding its own bodily states (‘I am aware
that I have a headache’), there is simply no way that a body can be in a non-representational
state regarding that which is external to it. Yet all the things that Stoics and Platonists want to know are external to our bodies.

Plotinus perhaps appreciated the irony that the arch-dogmatists, the Stoics, were least able to defend the possibility of knowledge because it was acknowledged by all sides that knowledge must be infallible and materialism cannot explain how this is possible. The sense in which the intellect must be immaterial cannot be accommodated by making it into a Stoic incorporeal or by making it a corporeal property of a body. The intellect must be an incorporeal entity because in thinking, (a) the subject must have the intelligible object in it and (b) the subject must be aware of the presence of that object. The subject in (a) must be identical with the subject in (b); otherwise, a vicious infinite regress would threaten. That is, if these subjects were different, then the intelligible object present in the first would also either have to be present in the second or else a representation of it would have to be there. The former obviously solves no problem that is not solved by the identity of the first and the second. In the latter case, the skeptical argument looms with the possibility of misrepresentation. And in any case, there could then be no criterion showing us how to tell the difference between an accurate and an inaccurate representation. The only way that the subject that is qualified by an intelligible object and the subject that is aware of this qualification can be identical is if the subject is immaterial. By contrast, if the subject so qualified were a body, then there would have to be another subject—presumably, another body or body part—that had the additional property of being aware of the qualification of the first. So, thinking ‘in the primary sense’, as Plotinus puts it, must be self-reflexive and immaterial. This is not to say, of course, that thinking cannot occur in souls that have bodies as a necessary condition for thinking, that is, our bodies. In this case, the self-reflexivity is imperfect or qualified, and fallibility is actually ineliminable.
One of Richard Rorty’s principal arguments on behalf of naturalism is that all cognition is representational. This is, as we have seen, the argument of the Pyrrhonian Sceptic. And the conclusion of the argument is the same one for both: the impossibility of philosophy and the inevitability or at least preferability of naturalism.

With the rejection of nominalism and scepticism, the elements of the anti-naturalism of Platonism are all in place. The immateriality of the mind, in particular, dashes the hope of David Hume and all his disciples that someday the study of man would be folded into natural science. This is so because natural science is limited to studying what can be measured. And what can be measured is publicly available for study. But if Plotinus is right (and here Platonists after Plotinus expanded on his argument considerably), then thinking, the primary activity of the mind is self-reflexive. That means it is only available to the one who is thinking; it is not publicly available, except, of course, representationally.

Introspection is, today, much disparaged for obvious reasons. Privileged access does not fit well into the naturalistic framework. It is important to distinguish infallibility from incorrigibility, the latter being simply the impossibility of our being able to correct our introspective judgments since any correction would, by definition, have to be after the fact and so irrelevant to the question of what we previously judged. But infallibility, the absolute impossibility of error, is only available to an immaterial mind. As David Armstrong, the noted naturalist, stated, if there are infallible mental states, then materialism is false. This is a point, by the way, made long ago by Proclus. Here I do not want to pursue the issue of infallibility so much as I want to say a bit about a particular feature of introspective awareness of an immaterial mind. I mean the feature of our minds that makes it possible for us to be morally responsible for our actions and even for our mental states. This was a possibility, we saw in the beginning, that
Rosenberg feels he must reject. The naturalist must reject freedom of the will or free choice without which it is quite unclear what moral responsibility would amount to.

In a recent article, Galen Strawson has presented a rigorous formulation of a much older argument against the possibility of moral responsibility. According to Strawson’s formulation, ‘the basic argument’ goes like this: (1) Nothing can be *causa sui*; (2) In order to be truly morally responsible, one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental respects; (3) Therefore, nothing can be truly morally responsible. The argument on behalf of (1) is in the form of a dilemma posed for the defender of the possibility of moral responsibility: either one acts for a reason or not; if not, then it is difficult or impossible to distinguish the action for which one is morally responsible from the action which is just a reflex. If one does act for a reason, then that reason must consist in either in whole or in part in one’s mental state at the time of acting. But then in order to be morally responsible, one must be morally responsible for one’s mental state. If, though, this is possible, it is because one is morally responsible for the choices one makes to be in that state. If this is so, then one makes those choices for a reason or not. If not, then no moral responsibility; if so, then the reason must at least in part consist in the mental state on the basis of which one intended to cause one’s original mental state, the state that was the reason for acting in the first place. Thus, a vicious infinite regress threatens. It does not seem that one can be morally responsible for one’s actions because one cannot be morally responsible either for the mental state that caused the action or for whatever caused the mental state that caused the action. As Strawson notes, this argument does not claim that it is impossible for one to change oneself; it claims merely that whatever change one brings about, one is not morally responsible for it.
The ancient response to Stoic determinism foreshadows any contemporary Platonic response to Strawson’s naturalistic argument. The difference between Stoic naturalism and contemporary naturalism, however, is that the Stoics—especially the Roman Stoics like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius—strove mightily to become connoisseurs of moral responsibility, offering what I believe is an early clear example of naturalists trying to accommodate Platonism. There is no such accommodation in Strawson or in Rosenberg which seems to me useful for purpose of clarity. The general Platonic strategy, most explicitly on display in the *Enneads* of Plotinus, is to focus on two Platonic doctrines that flow from the general principles. The first is the immateriality of mind and the second is the desire that all things have for the Good. The latter might be expressed by saying that we are ‘hard-wired’ to the Good, which means that when we do in fact understand what the Good is in a particular instance, we necessarily act to achieve it. But being hard-wired in this way does not mean that we are ‘determined’ so to act. Such acts really are ‘up to us’, as Plotinus puts it. But when we act to achieve anything other than that which is unqualifiedly good, we are ‘constrained’ or ‘compelled’ in much the way that Strawson says we are. If this is the case, then how can we be morally responsible for anything?

The easiest way to see the Platonic argument is to consider the phenomenon of incontinence or *akrasia* or weakness of the will. This is a phenomenon the existence of which the naturalist must reject at all costs. For it will turn out that the only way to account for it is with an immaterial mind. Consider the recovering drug addict who desires to take the drug and at the same time desires not to have the desire to take the drug. Whether he gives in to the first desire or whether he resists it, the capacity he manifests in either case is very difficult to account for in strictly materialistic terms. For the subject of the first desire must be identical with the subject of the second. There is no way to model this phenomenon if desires are states of organic
material. Plotinus recognizes that sometimes our bodily desires are so strong that we are forced to act; we are ‘enslaved’ and so what we do is not ‘up to us’. Bad people are, Plotinus concedes, in exactly the sort of position that Strawson would claim everyone is in. But Plotinus wants to insist on degrees of moral responsibility since the compulsions are not all-or-nothing. So, if we are hard-wired to the Good and if bad people do not do what is up to them, again wherein lies the moral responsibility?

The acratic, the one who gives in to the desire he does not want to have and the encratic, the one who has the desire but does not give in to it, reveal plainly the unique status of a rational animal. For, say, the desire to take drugs is a rational desire in the sense that one must be rational in order to conceptualize the desire one has in order to act on it. But the desire not to take the drug is also rational, though not quite in the same way. It is a desire to refrain from doing that which is not good. It is normative rationality. Of course, all desire—including the desire to take the drug—is for a good. But the desire to refrain originates in reason that has determined that the desire to take the drug is a desire only for an apparent good. Now the tricky point here is that the desire for the real good can only appear to us to be good, too. The only difference is that it really is just as it appears, whereas the apparent good that is not the real good is not. We might put this by saying that the criterion of apparent good is internal, whereas the criterion of real good is external. That is, after all what it means to say that good is a property of being or that relativism is false. So, then how do we choose between the two apparent goods? After all, we want only the one that is really good for us. Plotinus, and Porphyry following him, says that the whole problem of embodied life is figuring out one’s true identity, either as the subject of bodily desires, such as the desire to take the drug, or the subject of thinking, the subject of the desire that the desire to take the drug not be followed. The cause, therefore, of
wrongdoing is ignorance of one’s true identity. And this ignorance is culpable—and hence, moral responsibility is possible—insofar as we have no excuse for not knowing the answer to this question. Why is this so? Because in thinking of how to live or what to do, we consistently recognize the authority of normative reason in ourselves. In every act of practical reasoning, we all appeal to universal propositions (whether true or false) on the basis of which we act in behalf of achieving the good for ourselves. But to recognize that authority even in saying, ‘the rule I have dedicated my life to following is: ‘never give a sucker an even break’, one acknowledges that one’s own good is determined by reason, not by bodily desires. Even someone who says, ‘I think that reason is the servant of the passions and ought to be so’ indirectly acknowledges the authority of reason in determining how to live. Of course, the exact same thing goes for someone who says ‘reason is the servant of my passions, but ought not to be so’.

Naturalists are being consistent when they reject moral responsibility. But consistency is a minor intellectual virtue. If it forces you to say, as I think for the naturalist it must, that there never existed a person who was tempted to do evil but who resisted that temptation or that there was never a person who gave in to that temptation, but rather than in both case there was merely indecisiveness, then it seems to me the sensible thing to do is to re-examine the principles that led one to this implausible position. The Platonist’s surprise for the discomfited naturalist, like Nagel, is that the contradictory of the principle that led one into this position, is not available as one item on an à la carte menu. The concession to Platonism regarding any one of its elements is the ‘slippery slope’ leading to some version of Platonism. Or, if Richard Rorty is right, it is the first step towards the re-embrace of philosophy.
Gerson, Lloyd P., *From Plato to Platonism* (Cornell, 2013)


Rosenberg, Alex, ‘The Disenchanted Naturalist’s Guide to Reality’