To recognize the best and be capable of doing it, yet to choose instead to do what you acknowledge to be worse—if this is a description you would be willing to attach to any of your behavior, how would you attempt to account for that behavior? Most people would say that they had been overcome by the immediate prospect of pleasure, or of avoiding pain, even though they judged that things would be worse for them in the long run as a result. Or so Socrates claims, in a famous passage at the end of the *Protagoras* (352d sq.). But what most people would say about themselves, he goes on to argue, is a misdescription. It is not because their better judgment has been overcome that they act in this way, but because in fact they lack understanding of what is best. Now, Socrates’ analysis might seem to run scared from what is most significant—indeed, alarming—about such behavior: the apparent fact that we engage in it open-eyed, fully aware of the harm we are inflicting on ourselves. But I want to argue that neither Socrates the character nor Plato the writer is refusing to acknowledge the phenomenology of *akrasia* (to give this behavior its customary label), even though they are indeed analyzing it as a kind of ignorance. The pattern of their argument I take to be this. People claim that they know what is best, but that they cannot make themselves do it. But when we consider what lies behind this claim, it turns out that they do not in fact know what is best, though they think they do. It is not only ignorance that they demonstrate, then, but ignorance of their own ignorance—Socrates’ great bugbear. They do not know that they do not know what is best. And it is the fact that their ignorance is double that accounts for the phenomenology of their *akrasia*, even as it contradicts their claim to be aware of the harm they are doing themselves.
A comparison with Freudian theory will help explain this point. Neurotic symptoms do not in fact arise for the reasons that patients will give—compulsive hand-washers, for example, may claim their hands are dirty, when they are not. The true reasons for their behavior lie repressed in the Unconscious. Now, what makes them neurotic (and this is the crucial point of comparison) is not merely that they are ignorant of the true reasons for their behavior, but that they are unaware of their ignorance, and have difficulty acknowledging it. Indeed, the simple acknowledgement of the influence of the Unconscious on their behavior, even before its depths have been sounded, is itself the first step to recovery. The unconscious desires exert the influence that they do not just because patients are unaware of them, but because they have repressed them, contriving a false account of their needs that renders them unaware of their very lack of awareness. So too with the Platonic analysis of akrasia. The unphilosophic majority are not merely unaware of what is truly good. In addition, they have adopted a false account of the good that prevents them understanding the real harm that akrasia does them. They realize that something is wrong, because they feel that, by succumbing to pleasure, they are damaging their own interests. This is like neurotics being aware that they need help. But since the interests of the unphilosophic majority are false interests, and since they are not aware of this falsity, they cannot understand the true causes of their behavior. So they have no hope of escaping its pattern unaided. Similarly, neurotics have no hope of escape from neurosis until they can come to understand their true desires, recognizing that their own account of themselves is false.  

What corresponds, on the Platonic side of this comparison, to Freudian "repression"? In fact, Plato draws on similar metaphors to describe it: bondage, enslavement. It is the process described in the Phaedo as cooperating in the imprisonment of soul in body by binding it down, riveting or gluing it to the body (82e-83d); or in the Republic as the enslavement of the god-like part of the soul by the animal parts (summarized at 

1. For a more general comparison between akratic and compulsive behavior see Charlton 1988, p. 169.