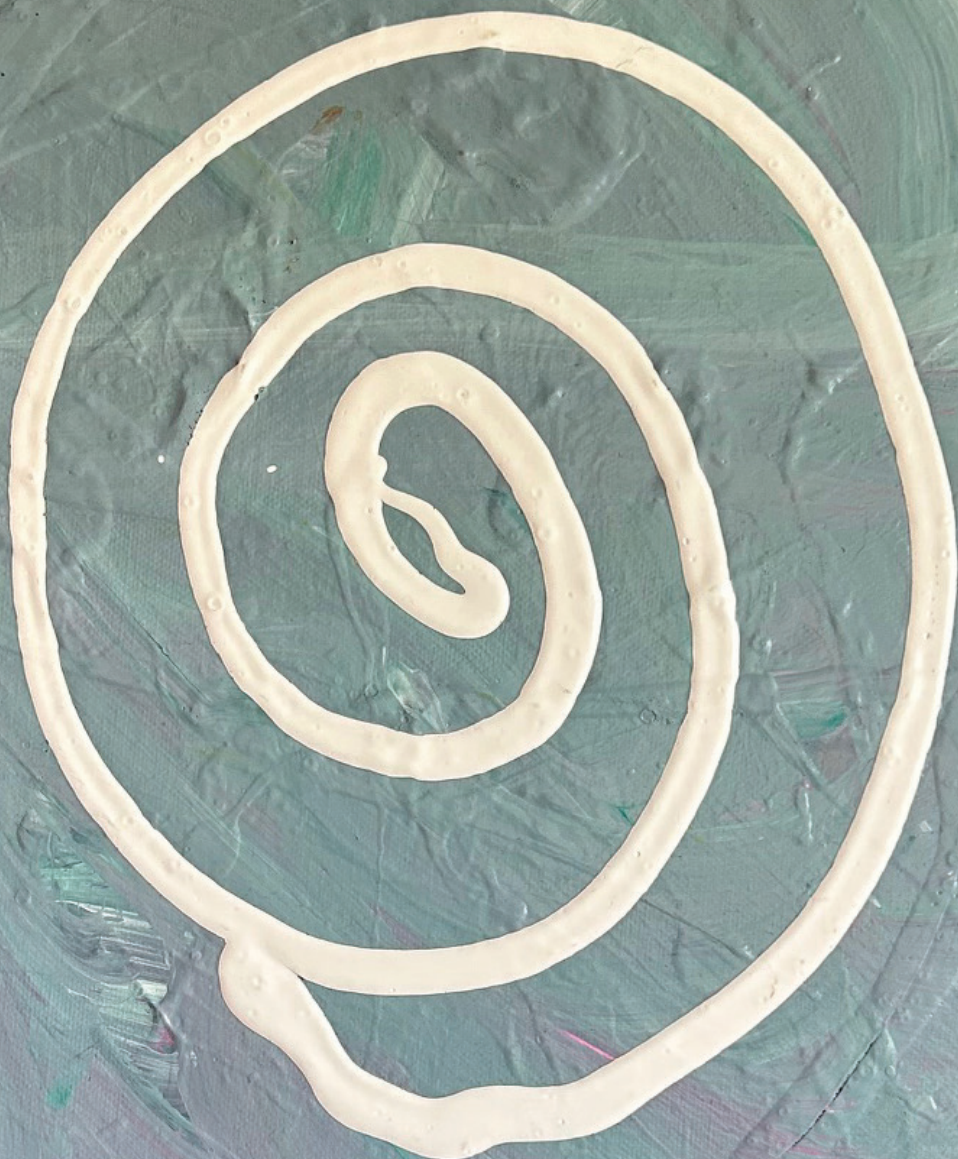


Axioms of Mind and Lived Experience

On Character and the Assumed



Christopher Bollas



I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. His mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you're different than you were at the beginning and you feel the difference.

Anne Carson

Being conscious of the unconsciousness of life is the most ancient tax on intelligence. There are unconscious intelligences ... flashes of spirit, currents of understanding, voices [...] and philosophies that have the same kind of understanding as the physical reflexes—gestures, or the way the liver and the kidneys secrete their juices.

Fernando Pessoa

It is well known that whole trains of thought sometimes pass through our brains instantaneously as though they were sensations, without being translated into human speech, still less into literary language.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

It is certain that we do talk to ourselves ... we talk, speak, cry out to ourselves without breaking the external silence. There is a great tumult; everything speaks within us, excepting the mouth. The realities of the soul, even if they are not visible and palpable, are nonetheless realities.

Victor Hugo

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Christopher Bollas



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About the author

Christopher Bollas is a psychoanalyst and Fellow of the British Psychoanalytic Society and the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies.

Prelude

This work proposes the addition of the term—the assumed—to identify select unconscious processes.¹

The assumed—a word akin to the unconscious in its scope—is a form of the unconscious but distinctive enough to warrant identification. This will allow all those interested in psychoanalytic theory to see it expanded, enabling practitioners to focus on techniques that can facilitate psychic change and improve lives.

Freud's topographic model was composed of three essential domains: consciousness, the preconscious, the unconscious. In addition, it had two main forms of thinking: the primary process and the secondary process. His theory of ego psychology divided the self in three parts: the id, the ego, the superego.

The assumed identifies three interrelated unconscious phenomena. First is the self's assumption that consciousness comprehends the stream of unconscious contents passing through it in the here and now, which is impossible. The false trope is, however, essential to the self's ability to think and function without being otherwise overwhelmed.

The assumed also refers to mental “constellations”, forms of memory that collect into a dense inner object, a “feeling” unique to said constellation—a type of “metaphysical sensation”²—so that when the self thinks about one aspect of the constellation, the entirety of its components feels as if it is there. A form of synecdoche, a part (mental or affective or somatic) evokes the whole unconsciously and, doing so, gives off its feel: an emanation that is the spirit of this particular object formation.

The assumed also refers to those forms of knowledge derived entirely from the “unthought known”: the knowledge that arrives out of actions and interactions. The infant brings his or her DNA into existence and is forming axioms about life from the beginning. The mother—the figure identified with the maternal order—brings highly complex acts to the relation, each of which bears an axiom which the infant either accepts or changes to form the realm of the unthought known. As actions become axioms the ego emerges after some years as autonomous and driven by millions of axioms that constitute human character: the assumptions that determine the way the self thinks and behaves.

The assumed is a theory of unconscious assumptions that are crucial to human thinking and behaviour. Identifying this realm offers useful perspectives on the self and how one can adjust one’s practice to enable analytical work in these areas. When the assumed is weakened or breaks down, we are witness to psychotic processes, and restoration of mental well-being is a crucial priority; one that must precede the search for meanings that will follow such rehabilitation. In addition, identifying pathological axioms that harm the self leads to “objectification”, a step in the direction of dis-affiliation in which the analysand renounces a disturbing axiom, liberating the ego and the self from constricting or destructive frames of mind and lived behaviour.