

The Doctrine of *Coincidentia Oppositorum* in Jewish Mysticism

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The doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*, the interpenetration, interdependence and unification of opposites has long been one of the defining characteristics of *mystical* (as opposed to philosophical) thought. Whereas mystics have often held that their experience can only be described in terms that violate the “principle of non-contradiction,” western philosophers have generally maintained that this fundamental logical principle is inviolable.¹ Nevertheless, certain philosophers, including Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhardt and G.W.F. Hegel have held that presumed polarities in thought do not exclude one another but are actually necessary conditions for the assertion of their opposites. In the 20th century the physicist Neils Bohr commented that superficial truths are those whose opposites are false, but that “deep truths” are such that their opposites or apparent contradictories are true as well.² The psychologist Carl Jung concluded that the “Self” is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, and that each individual must strive to integrate opposing tendencies (anima and animus, persona and shadow) within his or her own psyche.³ More recently, postmodern thinkers such as Derrida have made negative use of the *coincidentia oppositorum* idea, as a means of overcoming the privileging of particular poles of the classic binary oppositions in western thought, and thereby deconstructing the foundational ideas of western metaphysics.⁴

¹See W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: MacMillan Press, 1960), esp. Ch. 5, *Mysticism and Logic*.

² N. Bohr, “Discussion with Einstein on Epistemological Problems in Atomic Physics. In Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1990), Vol. 56, pp. 337-55. Bohr wrote; “In the Institute in Copenhagen, where through these years a number of young physicists from various countries came together for discussions, we used, when in trouble, often to comfort ourselves with jokes, among them the old saying of the two kinds of truth. To the one kind belonged statements so simple and clear that the opposite assertion obviously could not be defended. The other kind, the so-called “deep truths,” are statements in which the opposite also contains deep truth” (p. 354).

³ For example, Jung, in *Psychology and Alchemy*, p. 186, writes “The self is made manifest in the opposites and the conflicts between them; it is a *coincidentia oppositorum*.” Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*. The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol. 12. R. F. C. Hull, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). Originally published, 1944.

⁴ Amongst the oppositions to have come under the deconstructive gaze are word and thing, knowledge and ignorance, meaning and nonsense, permanence and change, identity and difference, public and private, freedom and necessity, God and humanity, good and evil, spirit and nature, mind and matter, etc.

In this paper I explore the use of *coincidentia oppositorum* in Jewish mysticism, and its singular significance for the theology of one prominent Jewish mystical school, Chabad (or Lubavitch) Chasidism. It is the achievement of Elior⁵ and other modern scholars of Jewish mysticism to have brought the Chasidic use of the *coincidentia* doctrine to our attention. In this essay I hope to move beyond mere explication by introducing two models through which we can begin to understand the Kabbalistic and Chasidic conception of the coincidence of opposites rationally, in philosophical and theological terms. These models each rest upon, and develop, the Kabbalistic/Chasidic view that language (or representation in general) sunders a primordial divine unity and is thus the origin of finitude and difference. The first, *cartographic* model, draws upon the idea that seemingly contradictory but actually complementary cartographic representations are necessary in order to provide an accurate two-dimensional representation (or map) of a spherical world. The second, *linguistic* model, draws upon Kabbalistic and postmodern views on the relationship between language and the world, and in particular the necessity of regarding the linguistic sign as *both identical to and distinct from* the thing (signified) it is said to represent. In the course of my discussion, I hope to provide some insights into the relevance of *coincidentia oppositorum* to contemporary philosophical, psychological, and especially, theological concerns.

***Coincidentia Oppositorum* in the Early Kabbalah**

The Kabbalists use the term, *achdut hashvaah*, to denote that *Ein-sof*, the Infinite God, is a “unity of opposites,”⁶ one that reconciles within itself even those aspects of the cosmos that are opposed to or contradict one another.⁷ *Sefer Yetzirah*, an early (3rd to 6th century) work which was of singular significance for the later development of Jewish mysticism, had said of the *Sefirot* (the ten archetypal values through which divinity is said to constitute the world) “their end is imbedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end.”⁸ According to *Yetzirah*, the *Sefirot* are comprised of five pairs of opposites: “A depth of beginning, a depth of end. A depth of good, a depth of evil. A depth of

⁵ Rachel Ellior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, J.M. Green, trans. (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993); R. Elior, Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God, in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. by Arthur Green (New York: Crossroads, 1987), pp. 157-205.

⁶Or as Scholem at one point translates the term a “complete indistinguishability of opposites,” Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), p. 88.

⁷See G. Scholem. *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Trans. by R.J. Zwi Werblowski. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987; Originally published, 1962 (p. 312). According to Elior *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 69) the term *achdut hashvaah* connotes “two contradictions within a single entity.” It is “the divine element that encompasses contradictions and reconciles their existence.”

⁸ *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:7. Kaplan, Aryeh. *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, Rev ed. (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1997). p. 57.

above, a depth of below, A depth of east, a depth of west. A depth of north, a depth of south.⁹

The 13th century Kabbalist Azriel of Gerona was perhaps the first Kabbalist to clearly articulate the doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*. For Azriel “*Ein Sof* ...is absolutely undifferentiated in a complete and changeless unity...He is the essence of all that is concealed and revealed.”¹⁰ According to Azriel, *Ein-sof* unifies within itself being and nothingness, “for the Being is in the Nought after the manner of the Nought, and the Nought is in the Being after the manner [according to the modality] of the Being... the Nought is the Being and Being is the Nought.”¹¹ For Azriel, *Ein-sof* is also “the principle in which everything hidden and visible meet, and as such it is the common root of *both* faith and unbelief.”¹²

Azriel further held that the very essence of the *Sefirot*, the value archetypes through with *Ein-sof* is manifest in a finite world, involves the union of opposites, and that this unity provides the energy for the cosmos.¹³

The nature of *sefirah* is the synthesis of every thing and its opposite. For if they did not possess the power of synthesis, there would be no energy in anything. For that which is light is not dark and that which is darkness is not-light.

Further, the coincidence of opposites is also a property of the human psyche; “we should liken their (the *Sefirot*) nature to the will of the soul, for it is the synthesis of all the desires and thoughts stemming from it. Even though they may be multifarious, their source is one, either in thesis or antithesis.”¹⁴

Azriel was not the only Kabbalist to put forth a principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*. The early Kabbalistic *Source of Wisdom* describes how God’s name and being is comprised of thirteen pairs of opposites (derived from the 13 traits of God enumerated in Chronicles), and speaks of a Primordial Ether (*Avir Kadmon*), as the medium within which such oppositions are formed and ultimately united.¹⁵

⁹ *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:5. Kaplan, A. *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 44.

¹⁰ Azriel, The Explanation of the Ten Sefirot, in Joseph Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, texts trans. by Ronald C. Kieber (New York: Paulist Press, 1966).

¹¹ Scholem. *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 423.

¹² Scholem. *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 441-2.

¹³ Azriel, The Explanation of the Ten Sefirot. In Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, p. 94.

¹⁴ Azriel, The Explanation of the Ten Sefirot. In Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, p. 94.

¹⁵ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 332-3.

***Coincidentia Oppositorum* in the Lurianic Kabbalah**

The concept of *achdut hashvaah* figures prominently in the Lurianic Kabbalah, which became the dominant theosophical and theological force in later Jewish mysticism and Chasidism. Isaac Luria (1534-72) wrote very little, but his chief expositor, Chayyim Vital (1543-60) records:

Know that before the emanation of the emanated and the creation of all that was created, the simple Upper Light filled all of reality...but everything was one simple light, equal in one *hashvaah*, which is called the Light of the Infinite.¹⁶

While Vital's account suggests a unity of opposites in the godhead only *prior* to creation, a close examination of the Lurianic Kabbalah reveals a series of symbols that are applicable to God, the world and humanity, and which overcome the polar oppositions of ordinary (and traditional metaphysical) thought. Indeed, each of the major Lurianic symbols expresses a coincidence of opposites between ideas that are thought to contradict one another in ordinary thought and discourse. For example, Luria held that the divine principle of the cosmos is both *Ein-sof* (without end) and *Ayin* (absolute nothingness), that creation is both a *hitpashut* (emanation) and a *Tzimtzum* (contraction), that *Ein-sof* is both the creator of the world and is itself created and completed through *Tikkun ha-Olam*, the spiritual, ethical and "world restoring" acts of humanity, and, finally, that the *Sefirot* are both the originating elements of the cosmos and only fully realized when the cosmos is displaced and shattered (via *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, the Breaking of the Vessels).

A closer examination of two key elements in the Lurianic system, *Tzimtzum* (concealment/contraction) and *Shevirat ha-kelim* (the Breaking of the Vessels) can provide further insights into the Lurianic conception of the coincidence of opposites.

In the symbol of *Tzimtzum* (the withdrawal, concealment and contraction of the infinite that gives rise to the world) there is a coincidence of opposites between the positive acts of creation and revelation and the negative acts of concealment, contraction and withdrawal. For Luria, God does not create the world through a forging or emanation of a new, finite, substance, but rather through a contraction or concealment of the one infinite substance, which prior to such contraction is both "Nothing" and "All." Like a photographic slide, which reveals the details of its subject by selectively filtering and thus concealing aspects of the projector's pure white light (which is both "nothing" and "everything"), *Ein-sof* reveals the detailed structure of the finite world through a selective concealment of its own infinite luminescence. By concealing its absolute unity *Ein-sof* gives rise to a finite and highly differentiated world. Thus in the symbol of *Tzimtzum* there is a coincidence of opposites between addition and subtraction, creation and negation, concealment and revelation. In order to comprehend the notion of *Tzimtzum*, one simultaneously think two thoughts, for example, one thought pertaining to divine concealment and a second pertaining to (this concealment as) creation and revelation.

¹⁶ R. Chayyim Vital, *Sefer Etz Chayyim* (Warsaw, 1891), "Sha'are ha-Hakdamot". Quoted in Elior, R. *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 68.

For Luria, the further realization of *Ein-sof* is dependent upon a second coincidence of opposites; between creation and destruction, symbolized in the *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, the “Breaking of the Vessels.” *Ein-sof* is only fully actualized as itself, when the ten value archetypes which constitute the *Sefirot* are *shattered* and are subsequently restored by humankind (*Tikkun ha-Olam*). While *Ein-sof* is the source and “creator¹⁷” of all, *Ein-sof* paradoxically only becomes itself, through a rupture which results in a broken and alienated world in need of humanity’s “restoration” and repair (*Tikkun*). For Luria, *Ein-sof* is propelled along its path from “nothing” (*Ayin*) to “something” (*Yesh*), through the creative and restorative acts of humankind; for it is only humanity acting in a broken and displaced world, that can undertake the *mitzvoth*, the creative, intellectual, spiritual and ethical acts that fully actualize the values and traits that exist only *potentially* within God. It is for this reason that the *Zohar* proclaims “He who ‘keeps’ the precepts of the Law and ‘walks’ in God’s ways... ‘makes’ Him who is above.”¹⁸ Thus, just as humanity is dependent for its existence upon *Ein-sof*, *Ein-sof* is dependent for its actual being upon humanity. The symbols of *Ein-sof*, *Shevirah* (rupture) and *Tikkun* (Repair) thus express a coincidence of opposites between the presumably opposing views that God is the creator and foundation of humanity and humanity is the creator and foundation of God.

Chabad Hasidism: The Unification of Opposites as the Purpose of the World

The doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*, which is an important if not dominant theme in the Kabbalah, achieves its fullest Jewish expression in the philosophy of the *Chabad* Hasidim, where it becomes the governing principle for both God and the world. For Chabad, all things, both infinite and finite, involve a unity or coincidence of opposites. These Chasidim held that the very purpose of creation was the revelation of these opposites, precisely in order that they should be articulated and then overcome. One of the early Chabad thinkers, R. Aaron Ha-Levi Horowitz of Staroselye (1766-1828), a pupil of the first Chabad- Lubavitcher rabbi, Schneur Zalman (1745-1813) held that “the revelation of anything is actually through its opposite,”¹⁹ and that “all created things in the world are hidden within His essence, be He blessed, in one potential, in *coincidentia oppositorum*...”²⁰ Schneur Zalman’s son, Rabbi Dov Baer, wrote “within everything is its opposite and also it is truly revealed as its opposite.”²¹ According to Dov Baer, the unity of worldly opposites brings about the completeness (*shelemut*) of

¹⁷ *Zohar* III, 113a. Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, Vol. 5, p. 153.

¹⁸ *Zohar* III, 113a. Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*, Vol. 5, p. 153. Idel translates this passage as follows: “Whoever performs the commandments of the Torah and walks in its ways is regarded as if he made the one above.” Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 187.

¹⁹ Quoted in Elior, R. *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 64.

²⁰ Quoted in Elior, “Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God”, p. 163.

²¹ Rabbi Dov Baer, *Ner Mitzvah ve-Torah Or*, II, fol. 6a. Quoted in Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 64.

God on high: “For the principal point of divine completeness is that...in every thing is its opposite, and...that all its power truly comes from the opposing power.”²² Within the godhead, earthly opposites are united in a single subject. According to R. Aaron Ha-Levi: “He is the perfection of all, for the essence of perfection is that even those opposites which are opposed to one another be made one.”²³ Indeed, the Chabad philosophy which developed contemporaneously with German idealism, bears a striking resemblance to the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. It is interesting to compare Dov Baer’s or Rabbi Aaron’s pronouncements to Hegel’s claim that:

every actual thing involves a coexistence of opposed elements. Consequently to know, or, in other words, to comprehend an object is equivalent to being conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations.²⁴

The coincidence of opposites that characterizes God, humanity and the world can be approximately understood by the simultaneous adoption of two points of view. As put by the founder of the Chabad movement, Schneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745-1813):

(Looking) upwards from below, as it appears to eyes of flesh, the tangible world seems to be *Yesh* and a thing, while spirituality, which is above, is an aspect of *Ayin* (nothingness). (But looking) downwards from above the world is an aspect of *Ayin*, and everything which is linked downwards and descends lower and lower is more and more *Ayin* and is considered as naught truly as nothing and null.²⁵

Indeed, Chabad understands the world in each of these two ways simultaneously: *as both an illusory manifestation of a concealed divine essence and as the one true actualized existence*. For Chabad, it is indeed simultaneously true that God is the one reality that creates an illusory world, and that the world, in particular humankind, is the one reality that gives actuality to an otherwise empty, if not illusory, God.²⁶

²² Rabbi Dov Baer, *Ner Mitzvah ve-Torah Or*, II, fol. 6a. Quoted in Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 64.

²³ Quoted in Elior. “Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God,” p. 166.

²⁴ Hegel’s Logic. William Wallace trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), par. 48, Zusatz 1, p. 78.

²⁵ Schneur Zalman *Likutei Torah*, *Devarim*, fol. 83a.; Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 137-8.

²⁶ The Chabad view is implicitly present in Azriel’s coincidentia between faith and unbelief, and the Zohar’s precept that “He who “keeps” the precepts of the Law and “walks” in God’s ways... “makes” Him who is above,” and finally, in the Lurianic notion that *Ein-sof* both creates, and is itself completed by, humankind.

While the Chabad Hasidim generally speak as if the divine perspective upon the world is its “inner truth,” it becomes clear that on their view this truth is itself completely dependent upon its opposite, the perspective from which humanity and the material world are fundamentally existent and real. In this they were in accord with the early Chasidic leader, the Maggid of Mezrich (1704-1772), who held that while God is the foundation of all ideas, the very significance of divine thought is contingent upon its making its appearance in the mind of man. For the Maggid, God is the source of thought but *actual thinking* can only occur within the framework of the human mind.²⁷

Chabad takes seriously, and attempts to spell out the full implications of the Zohar’s dictum: “Just as the Supernal Wisdom is a starting point of the whole, so is the lower world also a manifestation of Wisdom, and a starting point of the whole.”²⁸ For Chabad, the highest wisdom, and the fullest conception of the divine is one in which both perspectives (one beginning with God and the other with humanity) are included. For Chabad, the divine is truly a coincidence and unity of opposites, and the fullest understanding and realization of the divine is one that includes each pole of the Zohar’s “dialectical inversion.” It is only by *thinking in both directions simultaneously* that one can fully grasp the original mystical insight that the divine is present in all things. One implication of the Chabad view is that a God who simply creates man (direction one) is far less complete than a God who is *both* creator of, and created by, humankind (directions one and two), and it is only the latter bi-directional thinking that captures what the Kabbalists designate with the term “*Ein-sof*.” According to Elior:

Hasidic thought is strained to the ultimate stage in a dialectical way; just as there is no separate reality and no discriminative essence in the world without God, so also God has no revealed and discriminate existence without the world, that is, just as one cannot speak of the existence of the world without God, so too one cannot speak of the existence of God without the world.²⁹

Dialectical Process in Chabad Thought

For Chabad, “divinity is conceived as a dialectical process comprising an entity and its opposite simultaneously,”³⁰ as *Ein-sof* embodies the opposites of being” (*yesh*) and “nothingness” (*ayin*), emanation (*shefa ve-atsilut*) and contraction (*Tzimtzum*), ascent (*ratso*) and descent (*vashov*), revelation and concealment, annihilation and embodiment,

²⁷ Schatz Uffenheimer, Rifka. *Hasidism As Mysticism: Quietistic Elements In Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1993), p. 207.

²⁸ Zohar 1:153a. H. Sperling, M. Simon, Maurice and P. Levertoff, trans. *The Zohar* (London: Soncino Press, 1931-34), Vol. 2, p. 89-90.

²⁹ R. Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 62.

³⁰R. Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 25.

unity and plurality, structure and chaos, spirit and matter.³¹ In addition, these Hasidim held that *Ein-sof* unifies divine and human perspectives on the world, and that the coincidence of opposites applies not only to God but to the world and humankind.³² Finally, each pole of these various oppositions is thought to be both necessary and determinative for its opposite.³³ As Elijah puts it: “The principle emerging from these concepts states that divinity possesses two opposing aspects that condition one another.”³⁴

For Schneur Zalman, the truth of the opposite perspectives is necessary in order for both God and the world to actualize their unified essence. Schneur Zalman held that the very meaning of the cosmos involves a dialectical movement from non-being to being and back to nothingness. He writes: “the purpose of the creation of the worlds from nothingness to being was so that there should be a *Yesh* (Creation), and that the *Yesh* should be *Ayin* (Nothing)”³⁵ For Chabad, in order for *Ein-sof* to fulfill its essence as the infinite God, it must differentiate itself and actualize all possibilities in existence (*Yesh*) only to have them each return to itself in nothingness (*Ayin*). According to Rabbi Aaron Ha Levi it is the basic divine purpose that the world should be differentiated and revealed in each of its finite particulars and yet united in a single infinite source.³⁶ Rabbi Aaron states:

...the essence of His intention is that his *coincidentia* be manifested in concrete reality, that is, that all realities and their levels be revealed in actuality, each detail in itself, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value, that is, that they be revealed as separated essences, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value.³⁷

We can interpret the process that Schneur Zalman and Rabbi Aaron describe in the following way. *Ein-sof*, which is initially *actually nothing* but *potentially all things*, differentiates and actualizes itself into each of the innumerable manifestations of a finite world. It does so precisely in order that these finite entities can actualize the *sefirotic* values (e.g. wisdom, understanding, kindness, beauty, compassion, etc.) which are only

³¹R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 25. According to Elijah, these *coincidentia* appear in the Lurianic Kabbalah, but presumably apply only to the heavenly realms. In Chabad they apply to the earthly and human realms as well (ibid., p. 26)

³² R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 26.

³³ R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 25.

³⁴ R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 25.

³⁵ Schneur Zalman, *Likkutei Torah*, Leviticus, p. 83, quoted in Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 137.

³⁶ R. Elijah, “Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God,” p. 165.

³⁷ R. Elijah. “Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God,” p. 167.

divine abstractions prior to the world's creation. By instantiating these intellectual, spiritual, ethical and aesthetic values, the entities of the finite world (i.e. human beings) negate their individual desire and will and "return" to *Ein-sof* (*Ayin* or "nothing"). From another perspective, humanity actually *constitutes* the source of all value, the infinite, *Ein-sof*, and in this way achieves unity with the divine. For this reason, a world that is alienated from and then reunited with God is superior to one that had never been alienated or divided at all.

There is thus a practical, spiritual and ethical dimension to the "coincidence of opposites" that finds its expression in the Chabad system of belief. Schneur Zalman implores his followers both to nullify (*bittul*) the self and matter in favor of the Godhead *and* to bring about the infusion of the divine will into the material world through religious worship and the performance of divine *mitzvot* (commandments). According to Schneur Zalman:

there are two aspects in the service of the Lord. One seeks to leave its sheath of bodily material. The second is the... aspect of the drawing down of the divinity from above precisely in the various vessels in Torah and the *commandments*.³⁸

Further: "Just as one annihilates oneself from *Yesh* (Existence) to *Ayin* (Nothingness), so too it is drawn down from above from *Ayin* to *Yesh*, so that the light of the infinite may emanate truly below as it does above."³⁹ Again, there is a coincidence of opposites on the level of spiritual and moral action. One must annihilate one's finite separate existence in favor of the infinite God, and in the process one is paradoxically able to draw down the divine essence into the vessels of the finite world. For Chabad, there is thus an "upper unification" (*Yichud ha-elyon*) in which the world and self are annihilated in favor of their re-inclusion within the godhead, and a "lower unification" (*Yichud ha-tachton*) in which there is an influx of divinity into the world. What's more, each of these "unifications" is fully dependent upon the other. It is thus through a doctrine of the coincidence of opposites that Chabad is able to combine the opposing principles of mystical quietism and an active concern with the material world.⁴⁰

Incidentally, I believe that through their doctrine of *achdut hashvaah*, the coincidence of the dual aspects of infinite and finite existence, the Chabad Hasidim are able to avoid the pantheistic implications that might originally attach to the view that there is nothing outside of God. Although Schneur Zalman and others in the Chabad movement make such acosmic pronouncements as: "Everything is as absolutely nothing and nought in relation to His (God's) being and essence,"⁴¹ "For in truth there is no place

³⁸ Schneur Zalman, *Torah Or*, p. 49, quoted in R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 134.

³⁹ Schneur Zalman, *Torah Or*, p. 58, quoted in R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 150.

⁴⁰ R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 31.

⁴¹ Schneur Zalman. *Igeret Ha Kodesh*, Ch. 6, *Likutei-Amarim-Tanya* Bi-lingual edition. (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1981)., p. 421.

devoid of Him...and there is nothing truly beside Him,⁴² and "although the worlds seem like an entity to us, that is an utter lie,"⁴³ such pronouncements are only from one of two equally valid points of view, the supernal one. In Chabad the traditional Jewish distinction between God and creation, is not discarded but is dynamically transformed into two "starting points" or "points of view," which though dialectically interdependent, must at the same time remain distinct in order to fulfill the purpose of both God and the universe. Chabad is actually typically Jewish in its view that God's presence and glory fills the whole earth, but that humanity must be distinguished from God and granted a measure of freedom, in order that it may return to Him through worship and *mitzvot*. Metaphysically speaking, Chabad again bids us to think two opposite thoughts simultaneously; the thoughts (1) that God is all and there is nothing beside Him, and (2) that God and humanity are separate and distinct and humanity is implored to *return* to, and in effect constitute God, through divine worship and the performance of the *mitzvot*.

It is, I believe, the double movement of Chabad thought, its insistence on a coincidence between two opposing perspectives on the reality of God and humanity that differentiates it from most other forms of mysticism, and underscores its significance for philosophy and theology. While according to Elijah, "The great intellectual effort invested in Chabad writings is meant to bring one as close as possible to the divine point of view, according to which every creature is considered as nothing and nought with respect to the active power within it,"⁴⁴ a close reading of Chabad formulations as they are found even Elijah's own writings suggests a much more subtle theology. The goal of Chabad thought, it seems to me, is to bring us as close as possible to *simultaneously realizing both* the worldly and divine points of view, thinking them simultaneously, and recognizing their complete interdependence; thereby providing us with an intimation of the fullness of divinity as it is manifest in the world and humankind.

Understanding the Mystical Paradox

Is it possible to *rationaly* comprehend the paradoxes of Jewish mysticism, e.g. that God creates humanity and humanity creates the divine, that the world is both an illusion and reality, that *Ein-sof is and is not* identical with the world, that creation is at the same time a negation, that values must be destroyed in order to be actualized? Mystics of various persuasions have generally held that such paradoxes are the best means of expressing within language, truths about a whole that is sundered by the very operation of language itself. Any effort, it is said, to analyze these paradoxes and provide them with logical sense is doomed from the start because logic itself rests upon assumptions, such as the laws of "non-contradiction" and "the excluded middle," that are violated by the mystical ideas.

⁴² S. Zalman, *Likutei-Amarim-Tanya* Chapter 35, p. 159.

⁴³ R. Elijah, "Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God," p. 80.

⁴⁴ R. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 56.

Hegel was the last great philosopher to hold that the identity of opposites could be demonstrated rationally. His view that *coincidentia oppositorum* yields a *logical principle* was treated with such scorn by later generations of philosophers that the idea of finding a rational/philosophical parallel to the mystic quest became an anathema to serious philosophers. Even W. T. Stace, who was highly sympathetic to mysticism eventually came to the view that in trying to make a logic out of the coincidence of opposites Hegel fell “into a species of chicanery. According to Stace, “every one of [Hegel’s] supposed logical deductions was performed by the systematic misuse of language, by palpable fallacies, and sometimes...by simply punning on words.”⁴⁵ Stace, who early on wrote a sympathetic, and now much maligned, book on Hegel’s system, gave up the idea that *coincidentia oppositorum* could be shown to be a rational principle, holding that “the identity of opposites is not a logical, but definitely an alogical idea.”⁴⁶

It is thus with a certain trepidation that in the following sections, I offer two strategies or models that I believe will enable us to comprehend in rational terms how the overcoming, or simultaneous assertion of opposite, apparently contradictory, ideas can provide a more complete account of both particular phenomena and the “world as a whole” than the privileging of one pole of an opposition and the exclusion of the other. The first of these models is “cartographic” and the second “linguistic,” but each are founded broadly on the view that *representation* sunders a unified theological or metaphysical whole. It is my hope that the model I offer can provide a degree of insight into the Kabbalistic/Hasidic view that both God and every actual thing in the world is a *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Model 1: Lessons from a Two-Dimensional World

The first model can best be introduced via an analogy, one that is derived from Edwin Abbott’s 1884 book, *Flatland*.⁴⁷ Our analogy will prompt us to temporarily adopt a perspective on the world that is *less complete* than our own. (In Kabbalistic terms, we will be compounding the effects of the *Tzimtzum* --the contraction and concealment which the Kabbalists held gives rise to both partial ignorance and the finite world.) The process of working out certain conundrums about the physical world from a more limited perspective than our own will, it is hoped, shed considerable light on certain metaphysical and theological questions that are difficult to resolve from within our actual epistemic situation.

Imagine for the moment a world that is virtually identical to the world we live in, but for the fact that the inhabitants are unable to represent, or even conceptualize, anything in more than two dimensions. It is not necessary that we fully imagine ourselves into this world, only that we accept the fact that even though the inhabitants of this world live in a world of three dimensions, they can only conceptualize themselves within two (in much the same manner that we, for example, cannot conceptualize the

⁴⁵W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 213.

⁴⁶W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 213.

⁴⁷ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

curvature of space-time, or the existence of extra dimensions that modern physics insists complement the three [or four] of human experience).

One of the consequences of the inability to conceptualize experience in more than two dimensions (and the most important consequence for our current purposes) is that all representations of the spherical earth would be constructed in two-dimensions rather than three. In short, our “2D people” would have maps but no globes, and, however advanced their knowledge about their world, they would be continually faced with the epistemic problem of having to represent a round, spherical earth, on a flat, two-dimensional plane. This is, in fact, precisely the problem we have in creating our own maps, with the exception that, unlike the ‘2D people’, we have the capacity to represent the earth synoptically with a globe, and thereby immediately intuit the limitations of our two-dimensional cartographic projections.

It has long been a principle of cartography that it is impossible to perfectly represent a spherical earth on a two-dimensional plane. Every cartographic “projection” of the whole earth suffers from one or more serious defects. In the so-called “Mercator” projections, for example, the lines of latitude and longitude, which are parallel on the globe, are kept parallel, but only at the expense of creating gross distortions in the size and shape of land masses near the earth’s poles. “Polar projections” solve this problem but distort the shape and size of land masses near the equator, and create the further problem of requiring two circular projections, two maps in order to represent a single world. Certain, so-called “equal-areas” projections create the impression that there are huge ‘gaps’ in the earth, which are arbitrarily but conveniently placed in the oceans, creating the so-called “flattened orange peel” effect. Like the Mercator projection, these maps suffer from the problem of non-continuity at the equator, and as with all cartographic projections, one is unavoidably left with the impression that the world is flat and bounded by an edge; children often wonder what lies past that edge, and the ancients speculated that one could perhaps fall off into an abyss. (Actually, the space beyond the edge of a full-world cartographic projection is an artifact of the means of representation, and from within the scheme of the map, strictly speaking, does not exist. One would imagine, however, that the 2D people might have various theories concerning this region of “non-being”).

For us, each of the various two-dimensional projections of the world is a ‘perspective’ upon the three-dimensional earth: each is suited to a particular purpose, and each has the practical advantage of being amenable to major increases in size and detail without concomitant geometric increases in their bulk. Their limitations are, however, readily apparent to us precisely because we can compare them to the “perfect” representation of the three-dimensional globe. Our two-dimensional counterparts however, have no such recourse to a “perfect model,” and we might imagine that their various maps would, for them, engender a number of scientific and philosophical puzzles, which they would seek to resolve through a variety of models and theories, just as our inability to see the world *sub-species aeternae* generates scientific and metaphysical theories designed to reconcile our various perspectives on a reality much broader than the earthly globe.

One particular feature of the two-dimensional people's descriptions of the world is that they would naturally be prompted by their projections into offering a number of interesting propositions about the world as a whole. For example, cartographers from the "2-D" world, might argue (and they would be correct in doing so) that each of their projections were *complete* maps of the world. Likely they would also realize that two (or more) projections were mutually corrective in that the distortions of the first were not present in the second, and vice versa. For example, the Mercator projection gives the misleading impression that the equator is non-continuous and that land masses at or near the poles are immense. The dual polar projection corrects for these defects, though it has deficiencies of its own (not the least of which is that it gives the impression of two earths as opposed to one), and these defects are in turn "corrected" by the Mercator projection.

In considering their various projections, some of the 2-D people might be inclined to hold that one or the other of their maps were "true" and that the others were either false or imperfect approximations of their favored forms of representation. Others, less inclined to such dichotomous thinking, might hold, for example, that both their Mercator and polar maps were valid, that the world was both one and many, linear yet curved, rectangular yet circular, broken yet continuous at the equator, with parallel lines of longitude that are nevertheless widest at the equator and converge near the poles, etc. In short, their forms of representation might prompt them to utter a number of paradoxical, seemingly contradictory ideas about their world that their limited epistemic position would make very difficult or even impossible for them to express or resolve in any other manner. (Further, as I have suggested above, their limited form of representation might prompt them into uttering such other propositions of variable merit as the world lays situated against the background of non-being, that it changes with the perspective of the observer, that at points it is both infinitely extended and minutely small, that there are as many "worlds" as there are perspectives, and that the idea of "one world" is not a given, but a construction or achievement.)

Certain philosophers in the 2D world might argue (as certain 3D thinkers argue in our world) that the various propositions derived from maps are simply an artifact of language and representation, that the dichotomous thinking, arising in cartography, though necessary for practical purposes (i.e. map-making) leads to metaphysical conclusions that are neither justified nor necessary, or that the dichotomous expressions and points of view are permeable to, and actually dependent upon, one another. In short certain philosophers might hold (as do mystics and Wittgensteinians) that the world is inherently distorted through our efforts to represent it, and others might argue (as Neils Bohr did with respect to wave-particle physics) that in order to think about the world as a whole one would need to actually think that seemingly contradictory maps were both true (and complimentary).

The analogies with our own epistemic predicament should by now be amply clear. Like the 2D people, who have no synoptic means of representing the earthly globe, we have no synoptic means of speaking about or representing such totalities as God, man, and the universe. We have perspectives on all of these matters but no super-perspective

from which we can gain a perfect, integrated point of view. Our conceptions of the world are of necessity expressed via a series of dichotomies, but on closer analysis, these dichotomies, though necessary, are seen, at least by certain mystics and philosophers, to be either misleading or “permeable” to one another and interdependent. On this view creation is interdependent with negation; values are interdependent with their own abrogation; truth is interdependent with error, God is reciprocally dependent with humanity, good is interdependent with evil, language is completely interdependent with, and not fully distinguishable from the world, etc. Indeed, these are the very reciprocities that constitute the Kabbalistic/Chabad, and to certain extent, postmodern world-view. However, whereas the postmodern tendency is to avoid any hint of synopsis or totalization, the Kabbalistic/Chabad view is that such reciprocities between dichotomous conceptions, like the reciprocities involved in the 2D maps we have been discussing, point to a single, unified cosmos, which for the Kabbalists is a union of our necessarily partial perspectives upon it. Our failure to see or intuit this unified world is akin to the failure of our hypothetical 2D people to intuit the globe they live on; like them, we can only approximate a synoptic perspective through an extensive analysis of the reciprocity of our many partial and seemingly contradictory, points of view.

The Coincidence of Opposites: From Analogy to Analysis

Thus far I have provided an *analogy* that I hope renders plausible the idea that in order to understand God, humanity and the world as a whole, we must surrender our dichotomous thinking and think two or more seemingly contradictory thoughts at once. Here I would like to offer the beginning of an *analysis* of why such bilinear thinking is necessary in philosophy and theology.

Elsewhere I have attempted such an analysis with regard to perspectives on the human mind in *psychology*.⁴⁸ There I suggested that a synoptic view of the human mind can only be attained once we recognize the mutual interdependence of such dichotomies as determinism and free will, objectivism and constructivism, facts and interpretations, individualism and collectivism, and public vs. private psychological criteria. Here I will suggest how a similar analysis is necessary with respect to certain *metaphysical* and *theological* ideas, and further that such an analysis is necessitated by the very nature of linguistic representation.

As we have seen, a close examination of major symbols of the Lurianic Kabbalah, symbols that were adopted by the Chabad Chasidim, reveals that they each cut across, and are in effect “undecidable” with respect to one or more of the classic dichotomies of western metaphysics, and that they each express an understanding of one or more of these dichotomies as a *coincidentia oppositorum*. The most important example is the symbol *Ein-sof*, literally “without end”, a term the Kabbalist’s use to refer to the metaphysical ground of both God and the cosmos, and which cuts across the dichotomies of being and nothingness, universal and particular, origin and end, divine and human, personal and impersonal, and faith and disbelief. It is almost as if the Kabbalists invoke the term *Ein-*

⁴⁸ S. Drob, Fragmentation in Contemporary Psychology: A Dialectical Solution. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Fall, 2003), pp. 102-123.

sof to point to a “metaphysical whole” that is unavailable to us in the same way that a three dimensional globe is unavailable to the hypothetical “3-D blind” denizens of “Flatland.” Just as the globe is a physical whole “prior” to its being sundered into an indefinite array of imperfect cartographic projections (maps), *Ein-sof* is a metaphysical whole prior to its being sundered into a variety of imperfect conceptual dichotomize that seek to represent God and the world. In each case, a primal, inexpressible whole,⁴⁹ has been ruptured by the very system of representation that seeks to express it; the globe is ruptured by the system of representation that seeks to represent a 3-dimensional sphere in a 2-dimensional plane, and *Ein-sof* is sundered by the very system of representation (i.e. language) that seeks to speak of a unity, but which has dichotomy and distinction as the very condition of its expressing anything at all.

As we have seen, in the case we have been examining, cartography, it is the *system of representation*, the attempt to represent three dimensions on a two dimensional plane, that sunders the globe into a series of only partially adequate and seemingly contradictory maps. Is it possible that the metaphysical case follows the cartographic and that our inability to comprehend the world and cosmos as a unified whole is a function of our attempts at linguistic representation?

Model 2: Overcoming the Distinction between Words and Things

The Chabad Chasidim held that the *Tzimtzum*, the act of contraction and concealment which wrought all distinctions and brought the world into being, was a *linguistic* act. According to Schneur Zalman, the *Tzimtzum* is a revealing/concealing act in which the infinite, *Ein-sof*, contracts itself into language, specifically in the combinations of letters which comprise the so-called “ten utterances of creation.”⁵⁰ Such contraction into language is both a concealment and revelation of the divine essence.⁵¹ The *Tzimtzum* inaugurates a distinction between language and the world which conceals the singular unity of *Ein-sof* but reveals an infinite multitude of finite objects and ideas. These notions suggest the intriguing possibility that by undoing the *Tzimtzum*, i.e. by overcoming the distinctions between words and things and thus language and the world, we can return to the primal unity of *Ein-sof*, the infinite God.

⁴⁹ In spite of the Jewish mystics’ recognition that concepts are “permeable” and conditioned by their opposites, that ideas indefinitely open to interpretation, and that there is even a “subjective” element in all things, they continued (in opposition to the Postmodernists who have maintained similar ideas) to take seriously the notion that there is indeed a single world, which is a manifestation of a single, absolute God. In providing a philosophical basis for the Kabbalistic/Hasidic view that God or *Ein-sof* is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, I hope to render plausible the notion that the overcoming of opposites enables us to *think* of the world (as opposed to *experiencing* it) as a unified whole.

⁵⁰ Zalman, *Likutei Amarim-Tanya*, p. 319 (*Shaar ha Yichud VehaEmunah* 7).

⁵¹ See S. Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 2000), Ch. 3 “Contraction into Language”

In this connection we should note that Schneur Zalman's understanding of the *Tzimtzum* arising through language accords well with the view, suggested by Derrida, that the most fundamental dichotomy, one that inaugurates the history of western philosophy is the distinction between the signifier and the signified, i.e. between words and things. It can further be said that this distinction inaugurates all other distinctions and, as such, is the very foundation of language and thought. If words could not be distinguished from the things they refer to or represent, no distinctions, no ideas, no descriptions whatsoever could be expressed. For these reasons, the signifier/signified or word/thing distinction is a critical, even "foundational" "test case" for our consideration of the coincidence of opposites in philosophical theology. If this distinction can be overcome, if it can be shown that there is a coincidence of opposites between word and thing then we will have arrived at an intellectual (as opposed to intuitive) vehicle for realizing the primal unity (between language and world, subject and object) that was sundered by creation.

Such a vehicle is indeed provided by recent philosophers, including Wittgenstein and Derrida, who have suggested that in spite of the fundamental role that the distinction between words and things plays in language and thought, this distinction is philosophically untenable. I will explore the reasoning that leads to this conclusion below, but for now it is sufficient to comment that it rests on the observation that the very process of pointing to or referring to a thing involves an infinite regress of words that disambiguate what one is referring to, but *only relatively and always within a further linguistic context*.

Interestingly, the Kabbalists themselves questioned the distinctions between language and both the world and God. Indeed, Moshe Idel has argued that Jacques Derrida's now famous aphorism "There is nothing outside the text," which in 1967 announced the collapse of the signifier-signified distinction, may actually derive from the Kabbalist, R. Menahem Recanti's dictum that there is nothing outside *the Torah*. Recanti, writing in the early fourteenth century, held "All the sciences altogether are hinted at in the Torah, because there is nothing that is outside of Her...Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, is nothing that is outside the Torah, and the Torah is nothing that is outside Him, and this is the reason why the sages of the Kabbalah said that the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Torah."⁵²

⁵² Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 122) Idel points out this passage was never translated and was unknown outside of Kabbalistic circles prior to its discussion by Gershom Scholem at the 1954 Eranos Conference in Ascona. At that time Scholem's comments and the passage itself were printed in English and French translations in the journal, *Diogenes* (*Diogene*). The French translation (1955-6) was made by the distinguished Judaic scholar Georges Vajda, and in French the translation reads "there is nothing outside her (i.e. the Torah)." Idel holds that "the fact that this statement about the identity between the Torah and God was available in French in 1957 may account for the emergence of one of the most postmodern statements in literary criticism: There is nothing outside the text." Idel suggests that in the *Grammatologie*, which was first published in 1967, Derrida, who maintained a certain interest in the Kabbalah, "substituted the term and concept of Torah with that of text" (M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, p. 123).

While the Kabbalists may have intuitively understood that both the world and God are, to use Idel's metaphor, "absorbed" by language, contemporary philosophers have offered reasons why this must be the case. It will be worthwhile to review the chain of reasoning that leads to the dissolution of the signifier/signified distinction in some detail. In doing so we will see that there is a *coincidentia oppositorum* not only between words and things (signifier and signified) but also between *the view* that the signifier/signified distinction is spurious and the view that this distinction is absolutely essential.

Several considerations can be marshaled in favor of the idea that there is no absolute distinction between signifier and signified, i.e. between words and the things they presumably represent. The first of these is that one speaks and writes on the basis of all the other words and texts one has encountered and not through any presumed direct connection between one's words and a transcendental signified or thing in itself. Second, language is a highly complex system, a differential matrix in which each word is defined via its place amongst and contrast with other words. Third, many words do not have clear empirical referents (what, for example, are the referents of "superior", "induce", "good", and "sad") and even when one can point to an object in the world that a word is supposed to represent, one's pointing is inevitably equivocal until it is clarified *via other words*. If I point to a banana and say "banana," how does my listener know that my reference is not to "yellow," or "fruit," or "food"? Further, nothing guarantees that my pointing or use of a particular word or phrase means precisely some unique state of affairs in a world that is somehow on the other side of language, and thus beyond all possible reinterpretation. One cannot delimit and control the meaning of one's words; they are always at least potentially subject to an indefinite series of recontextualizations and reinterpretations as they are heard or read by different listeners and readers at different times. Words such as those that I am writing now can and will be understood against the background of other texts (e.g. Derrida, Wittgenstein) and not simply as a *de novo* expression about the relational state of affairs between the fixed and clear notions: words and things. A related consideration is the oft-made observation, perhaps initially attributable to Nietzsche, that there are no facts, only interpretations. Just as all presumed facts in science are "laden" with and constituted by one or another theory, what counts as a "thing" (any thing) is laden with and constituted by our use of language, the words we have available to us (think of the Eskimos numerous words for types of snow), and the purposes we have in speaking and writing. In discussing the relationship between words and things we must remember that "thing" itself is another word and derives its meaning from the place it has in our discourse. This is another very concrete sense in which the signified (thing) is another signifier (word). One would have to, in effect, stop speaking, stop using language altogether in order to somehow grasp a "thing" that was "pre- or non- linguisticized," and in such a case this non-linguisticized x could no longer be *said to be a "thing."* Certainly, one does not grasp a non-linguisticized thing *with words*.

If signs and signifiers were truly distinct, and words attached themselves directly to objects, unmediated by other words, in a hypothetically pre-linguisticized world, we would not be able to say anything at all, because such objects or "transcendental

signifieds” would lie completely outside the matrix of signification. In such a case one could make a noise or a mark and point to a presumed object, but one would not be able to say what aspect of the thing one was pointing to, what kind of thing it was, and how it differed from other things. In actual fact, when we point to an object and make meaningful reference to it we do so only because our pointing and reference carries with it an entire language.

Still, as Derrida and others have suggested, one could not use language at all without the very word-thing distinction that we have here been arguing against. One could not speak about anything whatsoever unless one assumed a distinction between one’s words and their subject matter. Indeed, the very deconstruction of the word-thing distinction is itself dependent upon the very distinction it undermines. While it is true that when we refer to purported objects, referents or signifieds, we are only using language to refer to something that is constructed by consciousness and language itself, consciousness, as Marc Taylor has observed, *understands itself as using language to refer to an object outside of itself*, and in the process *obscures from itself its own role in constructing such objects* (this is a perfect human parallel to the Lurianic notion of divine self-concealment or *Tzimtzum*). As Derrida points out, *even though the distinction between the signifier and the signified is specious, we could neither speak nor function without it*. In order to say anything at all we must (at least temporarily) set up a distinction between what we are saying and what we are speaking about. (For example, we must speak *about* language or speak *about* consciousness *constructing* objects, etc.). Thus the identity of word and thing is a doctrine that can be written or uttered, but which can never be fully assimilated or understood. This is because the signifier/ signified distinction is a necessary assumption of language; without it we literally would not be talking *about* anything. Sense and nonsense, truth and error, reality and illusion, and what’s more all “subject matters,” e.g. science, history, psychology, etc. ultimately depend upon the signifier-signified distinction. Now while one implication of the deconstruction of this distinction is that our belief in “meaning,” “truth” and “reality” is in a sense undermined, if we abandoned these notions altogether, we could neither speak nor think at all.

We are left with the paradoxical conclusion that if language is to function at all, the two propositions “the signified is another signifier” and “the signified and signifier are distinct” must both be true. While on the one hand the very distinction between words and things is itself dependent upon a use of language that actually overcomes or obliterates this distinction, on the other hand, in order to use language, in order to even think, we must assume the very distinction between words and things that our deconstructive analysis has overcome.

There is a *coincidentia oppositorum* not only between words and things but between the (second order) philosophical views that words are distinct from things and words are not distinct from things.⁵³ Hegel taught that the history of philosophy is the history of developing a perspective opposing the last presumably all-encompassing one,

⁵³ No doubt there are third, fourth, and *n*th order *coincidentia* as well which the mind is probably incapable of fully grasping.

finding arguments on each side, generating a new all-encompassing point of view, which is itself proven incomplete, etc. (Deconstruction, in effect, recognizes this as an infinite regress and thus refrains from the claim that there is any possibility of reaching an ultimate philosophical synthesis).

The signifier/signified distinction is thus like the dual and multiple two-dimensional maps that our 2D people must continue to use even after they have realized that the world exists in three dimensions and that their maps are reciprocally corrective and determinative, and point to an undifferentiated globe or whole. However, we can also say that that the realization that the signifier/signified distinction is ultimately untenable is as close as our intellect can come to conceiving the metaphysical “globe” or unity that underlies the multiplicities of the finite world.

In recognizing the *coincidentia oppositorum* between signifier and signified we have an intellectual apprehension of a unified whole; a whole that unites the distinctions between language and world, and subject and object, and which is very much akin to the mystical union of opposites that is spoken of as *Ein-sof* in Jewish mysticism. Indeed, the Kabbalists held that *Ein-sof* (in at least one of its moments) is the primal, undifferentiated unity that is *prior* to the advent of the finitude and difference produced by *Tzimtzum* and language. In a logically later moment, *Ein-sof* is the union of opposite, even “contradictory” ideas. In comprehending the *coincidentia oppositorum* between words and things as well as the coincidence between the views that words can be distinguished from things and that they cannot, we begin to grasp how an integrated web of subject and object, and language and world, is implicit in each and every linguistic utterance or proposition. The deconstruction of the signifier-signified distinction provides us with a hint of a unitary whole that “antedates” language, or, put another way, restores the unity that had been sundered by language. However, as the very process of thought is predicated on the distinction between signifier and signified, our conception here is fleeting, as our deconstruction involves thoughts which necessarily again sunder the world into a multitude of entities and ideas, distinct from, and presumably represented by, words.

Interestingly, the Kabbalists sometimes speak of *Ein-sof* as equivalent to or a product of language, and sometimes as the origin of all linguistic representation. On the one hand, the Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yichud* recites “each and every one [of the people of Israel] ought to write a scroll of Torah for himself, and the occult secret [of this matter] is that he made God Himself.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, *Sefer Yetzirah* expresses the apparently opposite view: “Twenty-two foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them, And with them, He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed.”⁵⁵ Whereas in *Sefer Yichud* *Ein-sof* is the ultimate *signified*, in *Sefer Yetzirah* it is the original *signifier*.

⁵⁴ Moshe Idel. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 188.

⁵⁵ *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2, A, Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, p. 100.

Strictly speaking, “Ein-sof” should be used neither as a signifier or a signified, for to do so necessarily involves it in the very bifurcating, sundering process that it is meant to escape or transcend. To use “Ein-sof” as a word or to classify it as an object, however sublime or exalted, is to place it as one amongst others in a system of differences, and to have *Ein-sof* simply become the role that the term “Ein-sof” plays in, say, the language of Jewish mysticism. *Ein-sof* can only be used as a pointer, or, to use Heidegger’s expression, a “formal indicator” of that which is unsundered, and which for that very reason cannot be pointed to or said. Even using *Ein-sof* as a pointer in this way runs the risk of having it become just another word or thing. We might therefore say that *Ein-sof* is no-thing (*Ayin*), and its (non) character is such that it can best be conveyed through non-representation or silence. We might also say with the Kabbalists and Schneur Zalman that *Ein-sof* is the *Ayin* (nothingness) that is logically prior to all distinctions resulting from the *Tzimtzum* and language.

While the Kabbalists and Chasidim often state that *Ein-sof* is itself a *coincidentia oppositorum*, I believe that it would, at least initially, be more illuminating to say that the coincidence of opposites is a logical echo of the primal unity, after that unity has been wrenched apart and dichotomized by thought and language. The recognition that each pole of a dichotomy is fully dependent upon its presumed opposite, and (perhaps more fundamentally) that words are fully interdependent with things, provides a sign or echo within thought and language of the primal unity that was sundered by thought and language itself. A philosophical comprehension of the coincidence of opposites is a means of undoing the bifurcating tendencies of the intellect and moving back in the direction of an original unity.

For the Kabbalists, however, this return to the primal unity is all the more exalted for having passed through the dichotomies and multiplicities of a finite world; for such a restored unity is not simply a restoration of the original divine oneness, but is actually the completion and perfection of *Ein-sof* itself. According to the Kabbalists, it is incumbent upon humankind to recognize and even facilitate the distinctions within the finite world, while at the same time, through an appreciation of the coincidence of opposites, to comprehend the unity of all things. I believe that one implication of this view is that in disciplines as diverse as philosophy, psychology and theology, we must guard against a form of dichotomous “either/or” thinking that permanently excludes, and thus fails to recognize the necessity of, ideas and points of view that are seemingly opposite to our own. More positively, we must seek integration in our thinking by exploring the possibility that opposing ideas and points of view are actually complimentary. Amongst the candidates for such complementarity are theism/atheism, rational/irrational, being/nothingness, and freedom/necessity. From a Kabbalistic point of view, these and many other seemingly contradictory ideas are not only complementary but are fully interdependent. Indeed, it is the task of a theology which seeks to comprehend the “whole”, to articulate the manner in which presumably polar opposites are permeable to, and interdependent with, one another. In doing so, we participate in forging the “unity of opposites” that is said by the Kabbalists to constitute *Ein-sof*, the Infinite God.