

# The Coincidence of Opposites: C.G. Jung's Reception of Nicholas of Cusa

By David Henderson

Abstract: Jung states that whereas the alchemists were “the empiricists of the great problem of the opposites,” Nicholas of Cusa was “its philosopher.” The focus of this essay is on C.G. Jung's reception and appropriation of Cusa's concept of the coincidence of opposites. The concept is a key to understanding Jung's psychology. Jung's use of Cusa is a case study in how he adopts and subverts historical resources to build his own theory. The paper is written from the perspective of Jungian studies and is not a comparison of the use of the concept by the two writers.

Looking back on his life, in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung recalled reading Goethe when he was a teenager. “*Faust* struck a chord in me and pierced me through in a way that I could not but regard as personal. Most of all, it awakened in me the problem of opposites, of good and evil, of mind and matter, of light and darkness.”<sup>1</sup> While initially he experienced this as a personal problem he came to see that it had wider resonances. “The fact, therefore, that a polarity underlies the dynamics of the psyche means that the whole problem of opposites in its broadest sense, with all its concomitant religious and philosophical aspects, is drawn into the psychological discussion.”<sup>2</sup> However, this theme did not emerge explicitly in his work until well after his break with Freud.

In his writings Jung discusses the union of opposites, the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), *complexio oppositorum*, conjunction of opposites (*coniunctio oppositorum*), the tension of opposites, compensation, complementarity, enantiodromia and psychic balance. He is not systematic in his use of these terms.

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<sup>1</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, New York: Random House, 1961, 235.

<sup>2</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 350.

The coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) is one of the fundamental organising principles in Jung's thought. Key concepts such as the self, the god image, the collective unconscious, wholeness and synchronicity are said to be instances of the coincidence of opposites. In 1931, in his first use of the term, Jung describes the practice of psychology as a kind of performance of the coincidence of opposites.<sup>3</sup>

The modern psychologist occupies neither the one position nor the other, but finds himself between the two, dangerously committed to "this as well as that"... This is undoubtedly the great danger of the *coincidentia oppositorum* – of intellectual freedom from the opposites. How should anything but a formless and aimless uncertainty result from giving equal value to two contradictory hypotheses? ... We must be able to appeal to an explanatory principle founded on reality, and yet it is no longer possible for the modern psychologist to take his stand exclusively on the physical aspect of reality once he has given the spiritual aspect its due.<sup>4</sup>

Here Jung is holding the physical and spiritual to be a coincidence of opposites and is arguing that a modern psychology must accommodate both.

Pietkainen writes that Jung could be "called a *psychologist of coincidentia oppositorum*."<sup>5</sup> McCort observes that one "peculiarly modern, underground 'hideout' in the West for the *coincidentia* is the psychotherapist's office."<sup>6</sup> Eliade links Heraclitus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Cusa and Jung, and states that, for Jung, "the *coincidentia oppositorum* [is] the ultimate aim of the whole psychic activity."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The version of *Symbols of Transformation* published in the Collected Works (CW5) contains the following: "The self, as a symbol of wholeness, is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, and therefore contains light and darkness simultaneously." (576) This might give the impression that Jung had begun to use the notion of the coincidence of opposites as early as 1912, the date when this text was first published in German. However the version of this work, translated by Hinkle and published in six printings between 1916 and 1951, as *Psychology of the Unconscious*, does not contain this term. The revision, which appears in the Collected Works as *Symbols of Transformation*, was published in 1952. The paragraphs where this phrase was added are on pages 402-3 of the original 1916 translation and page 222 of the sixth printing in 1951. [*Psychology of the Unconscious* (1916), (Beatrice Hinkle, trans.), New York: Moffat, Yard and Company and (1951), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.] Consequently the argument that Jung acquired the concept from his reading Cusa in the 1920's is not undermined.

<sup>4</sup> CW8: 679. All quotations from Jung are from the Collected Works, unless otherwise indicated. Referencing the Collected Works will follow the accepted convention, i.e. CW3: 25 means Collected Works volume 3, paragraph 25.

<sup>5</sup> Petteri Pietkainen, *C.G. Jung and the Psychology of Symbolic Forms*, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1999, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis McCort, *Going Beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen and Deconstruction*, Albany: SUNY, 2001, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade (1965), 'Mephistopheles and the Androgyne,' in *The Two and the One*, London: Harvill, 1965, 81.

Coincidence here refers to simultaneity, not to chance or randomness. Two phenomena coincide when they occupy the same space, be it logical, imaginative or material space. In popular usage this notion of coincidence is often missed.

To call something a coincidence implies that it should not really happen and thus allows us to dismiss the coincidence as an unexpected, unusual anomaly that, according to probability, will not happen again. The history of the word in English, as chronicled in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, reveals that this dismissive meaning gradually creeps in, as the word is linked with “casual” and “undesigned.” The root meaning of the Latin word, which was used in the seventeenth century as a verb in English in its Latin form, “coincidere,” is simply “to occur together.”<sup>8</sup>

Even as important a commentator on Jung as Bishop misconstrues the true nature of coincidence by settling for the most colloquial usage. He suggests that Jung was “misleading” when he defined synchronicity as meaningful coincidence. “This expression is somewhat misleading, for the whole point, as far as Jung was concerned, was that more than mere chance was involved.”<sup>9</sup>

Jung’s lifelong preoccupation with the coincidence of opposites is a preoccupation with trying to understand the simultaneous appearance of apparently incompatible phenomena, events or situations. We are reminded here of Sells’ description of apophatic discourse.

Classical Western apophasis shares three key features: (1) the metaphor of overflowing or ‘emanation’ which is often in creative tension with the language of intentional, demiurgic creation; (2) dis-ontological discursive effort to avoid reifying the transcendent as an ‘entity’ or ‘being’ or ‘thing’; (3) a distinctive dialectic of transcendence and immanence in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent.<sup>10</sup>

Sells seems to be describing three instances of the coincidence of opposites: overflowing/intentional (emanation/creation), dis-ontological/reifying, and transcendence/immanence.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Trevor Smith, *“All Nature is but Art”: The Coincidence of Opposites in English Romantic Literature*, West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1993, xii.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Bishop, *Synchronicity and Intellectual Intuition in Kant, Swedenborg, and Jung*, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, p. 17. See also 15 and 119.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 6.

Jung cites Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) as his source for the term.<sup>11</sup> Jung asserts that the often “tortuous language” associated with the discussion of the union of opposites “cannot be called abstruse since it has universal validity, from the *tao* of Lao-tzu to the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Cusanus.”<sup>12</sup> Jung states that whereas the alchemists were “the empiricists of the great problem of the opposites,” Cusa was “its philosopher.”<sup>13</sup> The focus of this essay is C.G. Jung’s reception and appropriation of Cusa. It is written from the perspective of Jungian studies and is not a comparison of the use of the concept in the two writers. Therefore my treatment of Cusa is obviously limited.

Cusa is a major figure in the tradition of apophatic discourse in the West.<sup>14</sup> Along with the infinite disproportion between the finite and the infinite, and learned ignorance, the coincidence of opposites is one of the three central doctrines of Cusa’s thought.<sup>15</sup> Ideas of the coincidence of opposites predate Cusa, but he is the first to develop the concept systematically and to make it a lynchpin of his philosophy and

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<sup>11</sup> There are seventeen references to Cusa and his writings in the *Collected Works*: CW8: 406; 9i:18, 9ii:355n; 10:766, 806; 11:279; 14:124, 200; 16:409&n, 485, 486, 527n, 537&n; 18:1537, 1637.

<sup>12</sup> CW14: 200.

<sup>13</sup> CW16: 537.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter J. Casarella (ed.), *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006; G. Christianson and T. Izbicki (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church*, Leiden: Brill, 1996; Donald F. Duclow, ‘Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa: Infinity, Anthropology and the *Via Negativa*’, in: *The Downside Review*, Vol. 92, No. 309 (1974); Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001; Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Metaphysic of Contraction*, Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1983; Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism*, Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985; Nancy Hudson, ‘Divine Immanence: Nicholas of Cusa’s Understanding of Theophany and the Retrieval of a “New” Model of God,’ in: *Journal of Theological Studies*, 56(2) (2005); Clyde Lee Miller, *Reading Cusanus: Metaphor and Dialectic in a Conjectural Universe*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Jasper Hopkins, ‘Nicholas of Cusa’s Intellectual Relationship to Anselm of Canterbury,’ in: *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006, 55.

theology. For Cusa the coincidence of opposites is a methodology. Bond shows that according to Cusa:

At infinity thoroughgoing coincidence occurs... The coincidence of opposites provides a method that resolves contradictions without violating the integrity of the contrary elements and without diminishing the reality or the force of their contradiction. It is not a question of seeing unity where there is no real contrariety, nor is it a question of forcing harmony by synthesizing resistant parties. Coincidence as a method issues from coincidence as a fact or condition of opposition that is resolved in and by infinity.<sup>16</sup>

Cusa used the idea of the coincidence of opposites to accomplish seven tasks.

(1) It unites opposites; (2) it transcends analogy and comparison; (3) it overcomes the limits of discursive reasoning; (4) it exceeds composition and synthesis; (5) it surpasses both affirmative and negative language; (6) it frees the mind from quantitative concepts and enables it to achieve a comparatively pure abstraction; and (7) whether operating from theology, philosophy, mathematics, or geometry, it renders infinite concepts understandable and describable without violating their incomprehensibility or illimitability.<sup>17</sup>

Jung simultaneously appealed to Cusa's thought and denigrated it. He described it as an expression of the influence of the collective unconscious on the development of ideas in the fourteenth century. He claims that Cusa's coincidence of opposites is a staging post on the way to the development a more balanced God image in the European psyche. Under compensatory pressure from the collective unconscious the idea of the summum bonum was being undermined. According to Jung, Cusa did not, and could not, grasp the import of this aspect of his thought, because he did not have the necessary psychological concepts at his disposal. Jung writes, "It should not be forgotten, however, that the opposites which Nicholas had in mind were very different from the psychological ones."<sup>18</sup> In fact, Cusa's use of the concept of coincidence of opposites was more complex than Jung appears to acknowledge. Cusa uses it not only

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<sup>16</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, 'Introduction,' in: *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, New York: Paulist, 1997, 22.

<sup>17</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> CW11: 279n.

as a theological tool but applies it to all aspects of reality, including to the natural world.

Beyond the polemical strategy of playing off psychological language against metaphysical language and his tendency to pick up concepts and make use of them, often with minimal attention to how they were used by the author he is citing, the fact that Jung appears to have relied on two very early works by Cusa probably contributes to his narrow understanding of Cusa's use of the coincidence of opposites. There are three distinct phases of Cusa's thought about the coincidence of opposites. The first occurs in the two works cited by Jung, *On Learned Ignorance* (1440) and *On Conjectures* (1442). The second in *On the Vision of God* (1453) and the third in *On the Summit of Contemplation* (1464), completed shortly before Cusa's death. Cusa's understanding of the coincidence of opposites continued to develop after the versions that Jung had read.

In *On Learned Ignorance* the coincidence of opposites is described as one type of union of opposites. It is a "unity in convergence, that is, a 'falling together'... a unity geometrically conceived, but without quantity... It is a unity of substance without mingling and without obliteration of either party or substance."<sup>19</sup> Other types of union of opposites include instances where one opposite supersedes the other, where the two opposites are superseded by creation of a third, and where the elements of the opposites are mingled. The coincidence of opposites is beyond the reach of discursive

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<sup>19</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 28.

reasoning. The coincidence of opposites is a “unity to which neither otherness nor plurality nor multiplicity is opposed.”<sup>20</sup>

Moving beyond the discussion in *On Learned Ignorance*, in *On the Vision of God* “Cusa takes the notion of coincidence to its limits, beyond itself.”<sup>21</sup> In *On the Vision of God*, which Jung does not cite, the term *coincidence* occurs forty-six times. It is “the device by which finite knowing and saying can grasp the incomprehensible and speak the ineffable... It is a fact or principle and therefore discoverable, but no merely invented or contrived as we might use comparisons, metaphors, or analogies in ordinary language... it sets forth the way God works, the order of things in relation to God and to each other, and the manner by which humans may approach and abide in God.”<sup>22</sup> The idea that coincidence is discoverable would chime with Jung’s assertion that his psychology is empirical. The fact that it applies to relations in nature as well as those between nature and God and beyond nature, contradicts Jung’s assertion that Cusa’s coincidence of opposites is a purely metaphysical idea.

In *On the Vision of God* Cusa describes the coincidence of opposites as the wall of paradise, beyond which is God. “God is beyond the realm of contradictories... there exists an impenetrable barrier to human vision and reason... [Cusa] intends that the reader understand not so much that God is the coincidence of opposites, but rather that opposites coincide in God... the notion of opposites coinciding requires a transcendent vision – seeing beyond particularity and sensibility, a seeing through and

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<sup>20</sup> Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, DDI I.24.76 (h. I.49).

<sup>21</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 44-5.

beyond the image or symbol, and an antecedent seeing, considering problems in their infinitely simple principle prior to contradiction.”<sup>23</sup>

“To see coincidence is still not to see God. God, the object of human’s effort to see, however, acts on our seeing as subject so that the searcher and observer discovers oneself searched out, observed, measure, defined. This is one of the more interesting features of Cusa’s treatise – the human as *figura*, the theologian discovering oneself as symbol; the searcher after the meaning behind symbols becomes oneself a symbol.”<sup>24</sup>

Mystical theology makes special demands on the theologian, both affective and didactic. The ministry of such a theology requires a coincident method and an iconographic language, acknowledging the utter transcendence and mystery of god and communicating the paradoxical truth that God is known, and seen, as made known... The coincident method in service to mystical theology, therefore performs both an evocative and a descriptive function.<sup>25</sup>

The idea that “the searcher after meaning behind symbols becomes oneself a symbol,” resonates with Jung’s observations at the end of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

When Lao-tzu says: “All are clear, I alone am clouded,” he is expressing what I now feel in advanced old age. Lao-tzu is the example of a man with superior insight who has seen and experienced worth and worthlessness, and who at the end of his life desires to return into his own being, into the eternal unknowable meaning. The archetype of the old man who has seen enough is eternally true. At every level of intelligence this type appears, and its lineaments are always the same, whether it be an old peasant or a great philosopher like Lao-tzu. This is old age, and a limitation. Yet there is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things. In fact it seems to me as if that alienation which so long separated me from the world has become transferred into my own inner world, and has revealed to me an unexpected unfamiliarity with myself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 46-7.

<sup>25</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 48-9.

<sup>26</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 359.

There are some parallels between Jung's late reflections and Cusa's last work, *On the Summit of Contemplation*, published in 1464. Earlier, in 1460 Cusa had used the term *possest* to name God. It is "a play on words, a coincidence of *posse* ('can') and *est* ('is'), the Can, the Possibility that at the same time Is, the Can-Is, which only God can be."<sup>27</sup> In *On the Summit of Contemplation* Cusa calls God *Posse* Itself or Possibility Itself. According to Bond, Cusa is "superseding not only negation and affirmation but also the coincidence of opposites."<sup>28</sup> This echoes Pseudo-Dionysius' schema of affirmation, negation, ecstasy. *Posse* Itself, or Possibility Itself, is "that without which nothing whatsoever can be, or live, or understand... without *posse* nothing whatsoever can be or can have, can do or can undergo... if it were not presupposed, nothing whatever could be... In its power are necessarily contained those things that are as well as those that are not."<sup>29</sup> Seeing Possibility Itself involves neither comprehension nor cognition. Cusa "embraces the negation of knowing and at the same time the affirmation of sight."<sup>30</sup> The mind's capacity to see Possibility Itself lies in its own *posse*. In this sense the *posse* of the mind is the image of God, *Posse* Itself.

This *posse* of the mind to see beyond all comprehensible faculty and power is the mind's supreme *posse*. In it *Posse* Itself manifests itself maximally, and the mind's supreme *posse* is not brought to its limit this side of *Posse* Itself. For the *posse* to see is directed only to *Posse* Itself so that the mind can foresee that toward which it tends, just as a traveller foresees one's journey's end so that one can direct one's steps toward the desired goal... For *Posse* Itself, when it will appear in the glory of majesty, is alone able to satisfy the mind's longing. For it is that *what* which is sought.<sup>31</sup>

Jung and Cusa share a view that there is a bridge between the human and a greater reality. For Jung this bridge is the self and for Cusa it is the *posse* of the mind. The

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<sup>27</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Cusa, *On the Summit of Contemplation* paragraphs 5, 6 & 8, in H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 294-6.

<sup>30</sup> H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 62

<sup>31</sup> Cusa, *On the Summit of Contemplation*, paragraph 11, in H. Lawrence Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 297-8

concepts of Possibility Itself and the collective unconscious, while not equivalent, are attempts to articulate a sense of an absolute origin.

When Herbert links Jung and Cusa, he quotes from *On the Vision of God*, which, as we have seen, Jung does not refer to in his own work and which, I would conjecture, Jung had not read.

The psychologist C.G. Jung reinforces this linkage in his volume of the collected works entitled *Alchemical Studies* when he asserts that in the first so-called *negredo* stage of alchemical transformation associated with ‘the dark Mercury’, and the god himself plus the spirit he represents ‘is the *uroborus*, the One and All, the union of opposites accomplished during the alchemical process’. Jung’s statement here highlights not only the connection between the *ouroboros* and the *Eins und Alles* theme but also ‘the union of opposites’ each embodies, thereby establishing them as an illustration and a formulation respectively of the idea of universal complementarity enclosed within the unified wholeness of either a circle or a conceptual Oneness (*Eins*). In German terms this is highly expressive of Nikolaus Cusanus’s theory and goal of the *coincidentia oppositorum* (the concurrence of opposites) which culminate in an ultimate order that is God, who ‘is Himself the Absolute Ground, in which all otherness is unity, and all diversity is identity’ (*De Visione Dei*).<sup>32</sup>

McCort has a restricted view of how the coincidence of opposites operates in Jung’s thought. He sees the coincidence of opposites as an aspect of the self archetype, as “an idea embodying man’s ineradicable yearning for ultimate reconciliation... that reveals to us the impossible, yet necessary, congruence of transcendence and immanence... the metamyth of the overcoming of difference.”<sup>33</sup> He asks whether the coincidence of opposites is an archetype.

Precisely put, the question would seem to be whether the *coincidentia* is equitable with Jung’s self archetype which, as it manifests in myths and certain dreams, is characterized by Jung as “the *eidōs* behind the supreme ideas of unity and totality that are inherent in all monotheistic and monistic systems” [*Aion* 34]. My answer to this is a reluctant yes, reluctant for the following reason. Strictly speaking, the *coincidentia* is prior to all manifestation, being rather the eternal, dynamic threshold of manifestation, while yet comprehending anything through manifestation as an archetypal image, however lofty or powerful, it of necessity takes on a certain kind of bipolarity, becoming, so to speak, one vis-à-vis others (call it the one superior versus the many inferior archetypes) and thus is already less than the pleroma. I know Jung

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<sup>32</sup> Jack Herbert, *The German Tradition: Uniting the Opposites: Goethe, Jung & Rilke*, London: Temenos Academy, 2001, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Dennis McCort, *Going Beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen and Deconstruction*, Albany: SUNY, 2001, 3.

was well aware of this “paradox of manifestation”, yet on occasion he forgets himself and writes carelessly of the self as if it were a *prima causa* and thus merely the *primus inter pares* of a descending order of archetypal causes: “Wholeness is thus an objective factor that confronts the subject independently of him, like anima or animus; and just as the later have a higher position in the hierarchy [of archetypes] than the shadow, so wholeness lays claim to a position and a value superior to those of the syzygy... Unity and totality stand at the highest point on the scale of objective values.” [Aion 31]... My own sense is that the *coincidentia*, or what Jung calls the self, is not itself a cause, even a first cause, but rather the condition of all causation, as of all other principles of relative existence. It is beyond causation even while comprehending causation – indeed, how else could it be a true *coincidentia oppositorum*? Perhaps calling it a meta-archetype, ontologically beyond the order of archetypes yet remaining “close” to them, would help to keep this important distinction in mind. In the end, it is the Great Abyss, in whose proximity even poles of archetypal power yearn to lose themselves in one another.<sup>34</sup>

The coincidence of opposites as a limit or door to paradise, described in Cusa’s *On the Vision of God*, brings to mind Paper’s distinction between functional and non-functional ecstasies.<sup>35</sup> Functional ecstasies include, visions, lucid dreams, and problem-solving; dreams; shamanism; mediumism; and prophecy. Non-functional ecstasies include: unitive experiences; pure consciousness; and mystic experience. Jung uses coincidence of opposites in a functional way to describe a psychological, therapeutic process. Since Jung’s aim is to develop a psychology based on a teleological view of psychic phenomena it is not clear what place he allows for non-functional states. It is unclear whether or not Jung can accommodate “mystic experience”, in Paper’s sense, because it goes beyond psychology, much as God is beyond the coincidence of opposites in *On the Vision of God*.

Jung’s earliest reference to Cusa is in his paper of 1942, ‘A Psychological Approach to the Trinity.’ He writes, “Thus the spirit as a *complexio oppositorum* has the same formula as the ‘Father,’ the *auctor rerum*, who is also, according to Nicholas of Cusa, a union of opposites,” and adds a footnote: “It should not be forgotten, however, that the opposites which Nicholas had in mind were very different from the psychological

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<sup>34</sup> Dennis McCort, *Going Beyond the Pairs*, 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis*, Albany: SUNY 2004.

ones.”<sup>36</sup> In 1951 in *Aion* he asserts that *complexio oppositorum* is “a definition of God in Nicholas of Cusa.”<sup>37</sup>

A major problem arises because Jung repeatedly attributes the term *complexio oppositorum* to Cusa, rather than *coincidentia oppositorum*. In seven places Jung links *complexio oppositorum* with Cusa and in three places he uses *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is not until 1946 in ‘The psychology of the transference’ that Jung links Cusa with the *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>38</sup> Jung treats the two terms interchangeably. In fact the term *complexio oppositorum* does not appear in Cusa. Perhaps Jung has projected his own concept of the complex onto Cusa’s concept of coincidence. Beyond the clear factual error of misattribution, there is the conceptual error of confusing *coincidentia* and *complexio*.

In ‘The psychology of the transference’ Jung references *On Learned Ignorance*, without citing a particular edition,<sup>39</sup> and a second quotation is presumably from the same source,<sup>40</sup> although this is not clear. A third reference in the same paragraph is attributed to Heron’s 1954 English translation of Rotta’s 1923 edition of *On Learned Ignorance*.<sup>41</sup> Koch’s 1936/7 edition of Cusa texts is cited in the bibliography of CW16, but does not appear in any footnotes. Jung’s text of Cusa’s *De conjecturis [sic] novissimorum temporum* is from 1565 and presumably in Latin.<sup>42</sup> A further

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<sup>36</sup> CW11: 279.

<sup>37</sup> CW9ii: 355n.

<sup>38</sup> CW16: 537.

<sup>39</sup> CW16: 537 n27.

<sup>40</sup> CW16: 537 n28.

<sup>41</sup> CW16: 537 n30. The bibliography to CW16 has the following: *De docta ignorantia*. Edited by Paolog Rotta. Bari, 1923. For translation, see: *Of Learned Ignorance*. Translated by Germain Heron. London, 1954.

<sup>42</sup> CW16, p. 352. “*De conjecturis [sic] novissimorum temporum*. In: *Opera*. Basel, 1565.”

source, cited once in 1946, is Vansteenberghe's 1920 work on Cusa.<sup>43</sup> From this evidence I think that we can assume that Jung became familiar with Cusa after 1920, and most likely not until the 1930's. In any case it is not until the 1940's that Jung begins to use the coincidence of opposites to describe the self and/or God. Most of his references to the coincidence of opposites occur in the 1950's.

Jung uses the term coincidence of opposites on a number of occasions without explicit reference to Cusa.<sup>44</sup> The earliest of these is the one cited above in 'Basic postulates of analytical psychology,' published in 1931. The next occurrence of the term in the Collected Works is in a quotation from Rudolf Otto in 1939.<sup>45</sup>

In 1943 in 'The spirit Mercurius', it seems to me that Jung is painting a picture of Mercurius as an apophatic symbol. Mercurius "consists of the most extreme opposites."<sup>46</sup> Jung argues that the alchemists understood hell to be "an internal component of the deity, which must indeed be so if God is held to be a *coincidentia oppositorum*. The concept of an all-encompassing God must necessarily include his opposite." Jung cautions however, that "the *coincidentia*... must not be too radical or too extreme, otherwise God would cancel himself out. The principle of the coincidence of opposites must therefore be completed by that absolute opposition in order to attain full paradoxicality and hence psychological validity."<sup>47</sup> Full paradoxicality and psychological validity contribute to what Sells calls apophatic intensity. Jung's statement however that "the principle of coincidence of opposites

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<sup>43</sup> Edmond Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues*, Paris, 1920.

<sup>44</sup> CW8: 679; 9ii: 191, 301.; 10:674; 11:881; 12:259; 13:256; 14:258, 274, 540; 16:502, 522.

<sup>45</sup> CW11: 881.

<sup>46</sup> CW13: 269.

<sup>47</sup> CW13: 256.

must therefore be completed by that absolute opposition in order to attain full paradoxicality and hence psychological validity,” demonstrates that he has not fully grasped Cusa’s notion of the coincidence of opposites, because in Cusa coincidence does not abolish absolute opposition.

In his discussion of a dream in *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), Jung states that conflict is an essential aspect of the self. “The self is made manifest in the opposites and in the conflict between them; it is a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Hence the way to the self begins with conflict.”<sup>48</sup>

In ‘The psychology of the transference’, published in 1946, Jung describes the alchemical procedure of *mundificatio* (purification) as “an attempt to discriminate the mixture, to sort out the *coincidentia oppositorum*.”<sup>49</sup> Here the coincidence of opposites is presented as a pathological situation in which the patient is stuck. After the *mundificatio* the relationship between conscious and unconscious is “depicted in the alchemists’ Rebis, the symbol of transcendental unity, as a coincidence of opposites.”<sup>50</sup> In a lengthy paragraph on wholeness at the end of this essay, in which he refers to Cusa three times, Jung writes: “The symbol of this is a *coincidentia oppositorum* which, as we know, Nicholas of Cusa identified with God.”<sup>51</sup> However as we have seen this is an oversimplification of Cusa’s view.

In ‘A psychological approach to the trinity’ (1948), a revised and expanded version of a talk given at the Eranos Conference in 1942, Jung wonders “with what right Christ

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<sup>48</sup> CW12: 259.

<sup>49</sup> CW16: 502.

<sup>50</sup> CW16: 522.

<sup>51</sup> CW16: 537.

is presumed to be a symbol of the self, since the self is by definition a *complexio oppositum*, whereas the Christ figure wholly lacks a dark side?”<sup>52</sup>

In 1951, in *Aion*, his exploration of the relationship between the image of God and the self, Jung asserts: “The coincidence of opposites is the normal thing in a primitive conception of God, since God not being an object of reflection, is simply taken for granted. At the level of conscious reflection, however, the coincidence of opposites becomes a major problem, which we do everything possible to circumvent.”<sup>53</sup> To the conscious mind the paradoxical nature of the God-image, containing good and evil, can be shocking. Further on in a discussion of *agnousia* Jung observes that for Eckhart the Godhead “represents an absolute coincidence of opposites,” which from the stand point of human logic “is equivalent to unconsciousness.”<sup>54</sup>

*Mysterium Coniunctionis: An inquiry into the separation and synthesis of psychic opposites in alchemy*, published in 1955, contains seven references to the coincidence of opposites. Early in the text he has a footnote explaining his concept of the self.

The concept of the self is essentially intuitive and embraces ego-consciousness, shadow, anima, and collective unconscious in indeterminable extension. As a totality, the self is a *coincidentia oppositorum*; it is therefore bright and dark and neither.<sup>55</sup>

This description of the self as “bright and dark and neither,” echoes Dionysius’ schema of kataphatic, apophatic and ecstatic.

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<sup>52</sup> CW11: 283.

<sup>53</sup> CW9ii: 191.

<sup>54</sup> CW9ii: 301.

<sup>55</sup> CW12: 129n.

One of the many alchemical images Jung comments on is the dog. “The ambiguity of this figure is thus stressed: it is at once bright as day and dark as night, a perfect *coincidentia oppositorum* expressing the divine nature of the self.”<sup>56</sup>

The motif of the crossing of the Red Sea is also in image of the coincidence of opposites for the Peratic group of gnostics. The creative and destructive powers of the unconscious are contained within this image. “This *coincidentia oppositorum* forms a parallel to the Messianic state of fulfilment described in Isaiah... though with one important difference: the place of ‘genesis outside of generation’ – presumably an *opus contra naturam* – is clearly not paradise but *he eremos*, the desert and the wilderness. Everyone who becomes conscious of even a fraction of his unconscious gets outside his own time and social stratum into a kind of solitude.”<sup>57</sup> In another gnostic source the crossing of the Red Sea involves “running without running, moving without motion” which Jung characterizes as a coincidence of opposites.<sup>58</sup>

The theme of transformation continues in Jung’s discussion of the alchemical symbol of the marriage of the king and queen. “The coronation, apotheosis, and marriage signalize the equal status of conscious and unconscious that becomes possible at the highest level – a *coincidentia oppositorum* with redeeming effects.”<sup>59</sup>

The last reference to the coincidence of opposites in the Collected Works is in the 1958 essay, ‘Flying saucers: a modern myth.’ Jung observes about the action in a

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<sup>56</sup> CW14: 176.

<sup>57</sup> CW14: 258.

<sup>58</sup> CW14: 274.

<sup>59</sup> CW14: 540.

dream he is discussing: “This shows that it is a sequence and not a *coincidentia oppositorum*.”<sup>60</sup>

C.G Jung’s use of Nicholas of Cusa is a case study in how he adopts and subverts historical resources to build his own theory. In this paper I have explored Jung’s reception of Cusa’s work on the coincidence of opposites. The concept of the coincidence of opposite is a key to understanding Jung’s late work. While Jung was intrigued with the problem of opposites throughout his life, I suggest from textual evidence that it is unlikely that Jung became familiar with Cusa’s formulation until after 1920, and that his understanding of Cusa was limited because he was only familiar with Cusa’s earliest writings.

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<sup>60</sup> CW10 674