



• *Epilogue* •

The age of the Platonic symbol came to a close in the 17th century but the search initiated by Aristotle for a comprehensive theory of signs has not ended. Modern expositions of semiotics¹ use signs, symbols, metaphors, codes, indexes and other categories and subcategories in terms which make clear that both the meaning of and the relationships between these categories are still subject to debate. C.S. Peirce has made an advance on the numerations of Bruno, Tesaurio and the others; he has apparently been able to identify 59,000 categories of sign,² which if he is correct, would appear to give plenty of scope for present and future theorists but the search has been and continues to be essential for the understanding of man and his culture. It is said that one of the defining characteristics that sets man apart from the animals is his use of signs and symbols for communication and understanding³ a thought endorsed by Jacques Maritain who states in the opening words of the first *Journal of the Warburg*

¹ For instance, Eco 1986

² Cited in Gill 14

³ For instance, Cassirer 1976 26

Institute that “no problems are more complex or more fundamental to the concerns of man and civilization than those concerning signs.”¹

The meaning of a sign is ultimately circular and rests on itself and this, to the tidy human mind seeking the comfort of a secure foundation for belief and action, is unsettling. We saw that St. Augustine recognized this dilemma (page 4). “To handle words with words is to interweave them - like interlaced fingers: rubbing them together makes it hard to tell, except by each finger on its own, which is doing the itching and which the scratching” and modern thinkers do also, perhaps unconsciously using the same metaphor. “It is vain to try and master a text because the perpetual interweaving of texts and meanings is beyond our control.”²

In spite of these warnings, we, as rational beings, try to avoid the uncertainty of this circularity and continue to search for a basis on which to ground our beliefs, some premise which sign and symbol can actually point to other than themselves. Theorists on semiotics, searching for this premise, are often unable to resist the temptation to make reference to Reality³ without attempting to define what this slippery concept might mean. In this they are in good company since Socrates himself was unwilling to try. When asked to explain the nature of the Good he said he would only do so in terms of *eikona*: images or symbols.⁴ Language theorists now propose that not only does language evolve and expand through constant extension by metaphor but that many if not most language structures derive from physical metaphors of body and position.⁵ Whether this is enough as a complete explanation of human culture and belief remains to be seen. We may have to be satisfied with the realization that this culture originated and developed heuristically and is now sustained only through confidence and convenience.

¹ Maritain 1937 11

² Harvey 1992 cited in Gill 191. See also Gill 188 “This interweaving ... is the text produced only in the transformation of another text” from Derrida *Positions* 26

³ For example amongst many possible citations Gombrich 166: “we still tend to think that language offers us an almost complete inventory of reality.”

⁴ Plato *Republic* 533a

⁵ Lakoff and Johnson 198. For instance, and most basically, the positional metaphors deriving from up and down. Good is up.