Symbol

A symbol is a representamen whose representative force depends on how it is interpreted. This sounds like nonsense; for what else is the interpretative force of a representation but its interpretation? But an example will at once show what is meant. The word “man” has the meaning it has simply by virtue of there being a general law, or habit, among English speaking interpreters, to which the interpretations of it will conform. Not only is “man” a “general sign” formaliter, or in its signification, but it is also general materialiter, in its mode of being as a sign. It is certainly not an existent individual. [—] Still less is it an appearance, flitting through the mind, and gone forever. It is evidently of the nature of a habit; not in the physiological sense (if there be any), but in the sense of a law to which not merely all interpretations so far have conformed but to which coming interpretations are really influenced to conform. In short, it is a real general. All modern philosophers teach that generals are “mere” words, or “mere” conceptions, or “mere” symbols of some kind; although they are quite beyond comparison the most important things there are. However this may be, if generals are symbols, no doubt symbols are all generals.


References: MS [R] 491:6-7

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