

**WHO
COMES
AFTER THE
SUBJECT?**

E D I T E D B Y

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PETER CONNOR
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R O U T L E D G E
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published in 1991 by

Routledge

An imprint of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.

29 West 35 Street

New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane

London EC4P 4EE

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Who comes after the subject? / [edited by] Eduardo Cadava.

p. cm.

Essays translated from the French.

ISBN 0-415-90359-9. ISBN 0-415-90360-2 (pbk.)

1. Subject (Philosophy) I. Cadava, Eduardo.

BD223.W49 1991

126—dc20

90-20555

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Who comes after the subject?

1. Man. Consciousness—Philosophical perspectives

I. Cadava, Eduardo II. Connor, Peter III. Nancy, Jean-

Luc

126

ISBN 0-415-90359-9

ISBN 0-415-90360-2 pbk

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Who?

Maurice Blanchot

Somebody looking over my shoulder (me perhaps) says, reading the question, *Who comes after the subject?*: “You return here to that far away time when you were taking your baccalaureate exam.”—“Yes, but this time I will fail.”—“Which would prove that you have, in spite of it all, progressed. Still, do you recall how you would have gone about it?”—“In the most traditional fashion, by asking about each word.”—“For example?”—“Well, I would notice that the first word is *Who?* and not *What?* which postulates the beginning of an answer or a limitation of the question that does not go without saying; I would be expected to know that what comes after is someone and not something, not even something neutral, supposing that this term would let itself be ‘determined,’ whereas all along it tends to an indeterminacy from which nothing is exempt, no more the whomever than the whatever.”—“That’s not half bad, but it might irritate the examiner.”—“Nevertheless I would still go on by asking how one should understand the meaning of ‘come after.’—Is it a question of a temporal or even historical succession or of a logical relation (or both)?”—“You mean that there would be a time—a period—without subject or else, as Benveniste claims, and he was criticized for this, that the always personal ‘I—you’—referring to a person—would lose its sovereignty, in the sense that it would no longer have the right to recognize itself in the ‘it,’ that which, in any language, cannot lay claim to anything personal, except inadvertently: it is raining, it is, it is necessary (to take a few simple, but of course insufficient examples). In other words, language is impersonal or it would be impersonal as long as nobody gets up to speak, even should it be to say nothing.”—“It would seem that, as an examiner, you are answering for me, whereas I do not even know what question I am being asked. I therefore repeat the question: *Who comes after the subject?* And I repeat it in another form: What was there before the subject, which is of recent invention: the subject once again, but hidden or rejected, thrown, distorted, fallen before being, or, more precisely, incapable of letting Being or the

logos give it a place.”—“But aren’t you in an unwonted hurry to interpret the question as *Who comes after the subject?* and not as ‘Who will come after the subject?’ when really you are indulging yourself in seeking a time when the subject was not posited, neglecting the inaugural decision that, from Descartes to Husserl, privileged that instantiation (of the subject) that made us modern?”—“Yes, who comes after the subject? You are right, examiner, to turn me away from easy solutions, when I seem to be trusting ordinary temporality. The word ‘comes,’ I sensed from the start, is problematic—even understood as a present, it is only the imminence of a *je ne sais quoi* (as is indicated by the prefix ‘pre’ of *present*, by means of which the present remains always ahead (of me), in an urgency that does not admit any delay and even increases from this absence of delay, which implies a belatedness, at least as long as my speech, in a statement or a conjuration, draws it, in the act of pronouncing it, toward the abyss of the present tense).”—“Then if I understand you correctly, the ‘who comes’ never comes, except arbitrarily, or has always already come, in accordance with some incongruous words that I remember having read somewhere, not without irritation, where reference is made to the coming of what does not come, of what would come without an arrival, outside of Being and as though adrift.”—“The term ‘adrift’ is, in fact, appropriate here, but my halting remarks are not entirely useless, and they bring us back to an insecurity that no formulation could avoid. ‘Who comes’ has perhaps then always already come (according to the misfortune or fortune of the circle) and ‘Who,’ without claiming to once again put *the ego* into question, does not find its proper site, does not let itself be assumed by Me: the ‘it’ that is perhaps no longer the it of it is raining, nor even the it of it is, but without ceasing to be not personal, does not let itself be measured by the impersonal either, and keeps us at the edge of the unknown.”—“It holds us there in order to engage us in it, whereas becoming engaged presupposes the disappearance of ‘we,’ as the perhaps infinite extenuation of the subject.”—“But aren’t we getting away from Western thought by taking refuge in the interpretation of a simplified Orient, leaving the I-subject for the self (the Buddhist emptiness) of peace and silence?”—“That’s for you to decide, in the same manner that, returning to the question, I would suggest to you aloud a few of the answers that tacitly you do not dare to express, precisely in order to avoid making a decisive choice. I dare you to name: the overman, or else the mystery of *Ereignis*, or the uncertain exigency of the idle community, or the strangeness of the absolutely Other, or perhaps the last man who is not the last.”—“Stop, tempter, this distasteful enumeration where, as in a dream, what attracts and what repels are mixed, neither existing without the other.”—“Tempter, I agree, as is moreover any examiner, and I have the advantage over you of revealing myself and, in addition, of tempting you only to lead you away from temptation.”—“Making of the detour then temptation itself.”

And so on. I here end then this too easy dialogue, ending also my attempt to elucidate the question, without ignoring that I am vainly trying to avoid it, since it has not disappeared and continues to provide an uneasiness by its necessity. “Who

then comes after the subject?" Understanding it and not understanding it, I take the liberty of borrowing from Claude Morali the title of one of his books and the citation from which he derives it: "As if that appeal had sounded, in a muffled manner, a nonetheless happy appeal, the cry of children playing in the garden: 'Who is me today?'—'Who is taking my place?' And the happy infinite answer: *him, him, him.*" Only children can create a counting rhyme (*comptine*) that opens up to impossibility and only children can sing of it happily.

So Let us be, even in the anguish and the heaviness of uncertainty, from time to time, these children.