

**Reginald Osburn Savage, *Real Alternatives, Leibniz's Metaphysics of Choice*.  
Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998. Pp. 198.**

**Reviewed by Ohad Nachtomy, Bar-Ilan University  
and Tel-Hai Academic College**

A couple of years ago I gave a talk on Leibniz's approach to human freedom. I tried to apply some current philosophical distinctions in order to resolve the tension between Leibniz's doctrine of complete concept, which entails every truth about an individual, and Leibniz's insistence that such an individual—whose identity and individuality are defined by its complete concept—acts freely.

This problem constitutes the main motivation for Savage's book. In my opinion, it has all the marks of a fascinating and intriguing philosophical problem. In the face of a clear contradiction (which Leibniz certainly acknowledges) and especially in light of Arnauld's brilliant criticism, he employs the traditional distinction between Hypothetical and Absolute necessity, reasons and causes, knowledge and action, and infinite and finite analysis. Furthermore, Leibniz's doctrines of individuality, causality, and possibility are put to the test and face serious challenges, if not the threat of complete collapse. A lot more is at stake for Leibniz, for unless he can defend his commitment to freedom of action, his system is in danger of collapsing into Spinozism. Such a collapse was repugnant to Leibniz for it implies not only the collapse of human freedom but also that of divine freedom, morality, rationality and the goodness of God and the world. The very distinction between Spinoza's system (of necessity) and Leibniz's system (of possibility) depends on the resolution of the question of freedom. Clearly, this is a problem that deserves careful examination.

Following my talk, one of the philosophers in the audience remarked that he does not see the point of the current attempt to resolve historical problems which are clearly insoluble. I was struck by the force of his point. However, this does not mean that the problem is uninteresting and even if it cannot be solved, is it not worth our time and effort to investigate possible approaches to the problem and to at least understand why it is insoluble.

This remark made me think harder about the nature of the problem for Leibniz. I realized that we have to take Leibniz's characterization of the problem as a labyrinth more seriously and try to understand what it implies.<sup>1</sup> On a superficial level our objective is to attempt to find a solution to the problem. However, upon reflec-

tion and in view of the numerous discussions of the problem over the years, we ought to ask whether attempting to solve the problem is really the adequate objective in this case.

This sets up the background for my reaction to Savage's interesting book—a reaction at once sympathetic and skeptical. On the one hand, Savage makes a heroic attempt to solve the problem of freedom which is both bold and original. However, I think that in this case what is required is to gain more insight into the very nature of the problem, to consider whether it can be solved and, if so, at what price. In other words, one should consider what form a “solution” to the problem of freedom would take and, in particular, what philosophical price would be paid for that solution. In reading Savage's book, one gets the impression that if we just take Leibniz at face value and ignore the many distortions his current commentators have imputed to him, the problem would be solved once and for all. As I will argue, this approach underestimates the difficulty of the problem and makes the interpreter's work seem easier than it actually is.

If I understand him correctly, Savage aims to defend both divine and human freedom. He sets out to show that in Leibniz's system both created individuals and God have real alternatives<sup>2</sup> and that Leibniz's notion of freedom is not merely an intellectual exercise which depends on a technical notion of contingency (i.e., the logical possibility of an alternative action). Rather, according to Savage, we really do have the option to act in various ways (10-11). Such alternative courses of action would correspond to counterfactual truths about individuals. However, if Leibniz defines an individual by a unique and complete concept which specifies every truth about it and only about it, how can we make sense of the idea that an individual has real alternatives? In fact, the problem is more acute since the individual's complete concept defines its very individuality and identity. Thus, all the individual's activities and properties seem to be logically entailed in its complete concept.

To avoid this logical necessity, Savage challenges the accepted view that an individual is compatible with exactly one complete concept. He points out that commentators assume (but do not explicitly argue in favor of) a one-to-one correspondence between complete concepts and individuals. If one individual were to be compatible with a variety of complete concepts, this would allow for a variety of courses of action for the same individual (13). In this way, we would account for the possibility of *that* individual acting otherwise (e.g., of Caesar not crossing the Rubicon).

The main challenge to Savage's proposal is that of maintaining the identity of

the individual as fixed while allowing for variations in its complete concept(s). This would specify alternative courses of action and provide grounds for counterfactual claims about the individual. Savage confronts this challenge by drawing a distinction between a basic (common) concept and a complete (unique) concept.

He writes: “Leibniz held that God has a concept that sets an individual subject before the mind to an extent sufficient for him to identify that individual without having to call to mind a complete concept of it” (178). Savage distinguishes between an individual’s complete concept, which entails all the details about the individual, and the concept of an individual subject, which is sufficient to individuate but is still compatible with a variety of possible histories for that individual. According to Savage, this picture would make room for *real* alternatives:

God is like a sculptor who sees in a block of marble both a statue of Hercules and a statue of Venus [N 52; G IV 426/L 294]. God can make whatever he sees (presuming that he cannot ‘see’ whatever is unintelligible). Hence, the *in se* indeterminacy of primitive subjects is the reason why they can be otherwise than they actually are, why counterfactuals are true in Leibniz’s metaphysical scheme and why God chooses from among real alternatives (178).

This is in outline Savage’s proposed solution. The most striking difference between Savage’s approach and that of most of the literature on the subject is his focus on different possible individuals as the objects of God’s choice. He writes: “The keystone of my interpretation of Leibniz’s treatment of counterfactuals is the proposition that an actualized Leibnizian individual is just one among infinitely many possible completions of that individual” (13).

This picture immediately raises the following objection: Suppose that there is an incomplete concept of (the subject) Spinoza (in reference to Leibniz’s example in *Theodicy* §173). Why do all its various completions constitute the complete concepts of Spinoza? Clearly they would not constitute the complete concept of our world’s Spinoza but rather the concepts of various possible individuals. Achieving indeterminacy by varying the concepts of individuals seems to create a conflict between variety and identity. If you vary the concept of Spinoza, it is no longer the concept of Spinoza.<sup>3</sup> If a concept is individuated according to the set of predicates it includes, and if all predicates are essential to it, there appears to be no way around the problem.

Savage responds to this problem in a number of ways, in which he attempts to substantiate the distinction between a basic/generic concept and more particular completions of that same individual concept. Savages’ suggestions are insightful

though they need to be developed further. I will review here only the more promising ones.

Savage holds that a basic individual may be identified with receptive or passive power which is yet to be completed. This completion is to be understood within the model of an individual law or function. Leibniz stated that: "Individual laws 'complete' primitive passive power [G II 250/L 529]" (177) and "[i]t is helpful to think of the primitive law as analogous to a function" (177). While the law or the function fixes the identity of the individual, it is the initial state of the world or a given argument of a function that accounts for a variety of results compatible with the law or the function. Accordingly,

Nature would have had a different history if it had had a different beginning. If the laws of nature were applied to different initial data a different natural history would be predicted. Likewise, if an individual substance had a different beginning, i.e., a different initial representational state, or a different law, a different history would be predicted for it (at least non-discursively by God) (180).

This suggestion raises numerous problems: Can an individual be separated from the law which constitutes its individuality? Can an individual law (as distinct from a universal law of nature) be coherently separated from its initial state?<sup>4</sup> What accounts for the initial state of a world? Isn't it at least related to the other individuals which make up that world? And, if so, appealing to the initial state to complete the concept of an individual seems circular. We will leave these questions unanswered and assume that they have answers. However, in any case, don't we fall back on a necessitarian picture once the world is created? Using the model of a function makes this point particularly clear. Once the initial state is fixed or the first argument given, the rest seems to follow by strict logical necessity—a necessity more than fatal, as Arnauld put it.<sup>5</sup>

It appears that Savage has a reply ready:

We do not conclude from the fact that there is a law that predicts the velocity of the body at a given time  $t$  given a certain initial velocity that the velocity of the body at  $t$  could not be different if its initial velocity were different. ... Likewise, the same individual law can be appealed to predict the successions of perceptions an individual substance would have if its initial state were different (179).

But once the world is elected for creation, and its initial state fixed, the careers of the individuals who constitute it follow necessarily from their concepts. Leibniz's response to Arnauld's is that this course of events is contingent upon God's choice

to realize the best world. Thus, Savage has to show that his proposal is more attractive than the appeal to this more textually based line of defense, namely, the possibility of God's creating a different world.

There is another serious weakness in the argument, namely that Leibniz's notion of a world seems not to be independent of the set of individuals which constitute it. Varying the initial state of the world only means placing an individual together with a different set of individuals. Hence, the career of one individual is partially determined by the histories of others. For this reason, one cannot rely on an independent initial state to provide for a variety of complete concepts of individuals.

The following is a more promising suggestion of Savage for substantiating the distinction between a basic concept and a complete one. Savage writes:

I argue that in Leibniz's system the same individual 'absolute' subject (as Leibniz calls it [Grua 540] is the 'foundation', as it were, of different complete individual substances, or, as I understand Leibniz, persons, in different possible worlds. (83)

This picture depends on a metaphysical framework that "accommodates the idea of individuals' being different persons" (86). "A 'Person', Leibniz's suggests [in passages cited by Savage on pages 86-87] is a moral notion that is distinct from the metaphysical notion of substance or individual" (87).

The idea of viewing a person as a moral notion is a very interesting one. Savage draws on the etymological connection between the current notion of a person and that of the Latin *personae*, meaning masks or different characters in a play. He is thus implying that the same individual may have various *personae* or may be compatible with various moral characters. Distinguishing the notion of a person from the metaphysical notion of an individual appears to be promising for, after all, the issue of freedom (as Leibniz suggested and as Kant later made explicit) may be seen in a domain altogether separate from the metaphysical one.<sup>6</sup> However, this suggestion is developed no further and Savage prematurely returns to the metaphysical domain in which the suggestion to distinguish persons from individuals does not, in my opinion, fulfill its promise.

Savage suggests that the metaphysical notion of the individual is compatible with its being instantiated in many possible worlds. Each such instantiation combined with different circumstances and laws yields a different person (90-96). Only such a (worldified) person has a complete concept. In the conclusion to the book Savage writes: "Leibniz called the concept that results from combining the concept of a subject with the concept of a world a complete individual concept" (176). He develops this idea by arguing that the relations between these various

instantiations (e.g., possible Adams) are analogous to the relations between a last genus (*infima genus*) and its various instantiations. He writes: "I interpret 'another possible Adam' to signify, for Leibniz, an alternative *infima* specific determination of the *infima genus* 'Adam'" (95).

I find this suggestion rather intriguing. While it makes sense to see 'the first man' as a general generic term, it is very odd to treat a proper name (Adam) as a genus. It is precisely this point that Arnauld raised, and it led Leibniz to reply that any other possible Adam is a different possible individual.

Savage's idea is that an individual is a generic term which gets personalized through its instantiation in a possible world. This serves to fix the identity of an individual (a subject) and to vary its history or personality in a given world. Each person (i.e., a personified individual) has a complete concept which provides the grounds for counterfactual truths about its underlying generic individual. Thus, an individual (or a subject) turns out to be a pre-world notion while a person is an in-a-world notion with all its circumstances and peculiar laws. As Savage puts it, "For Leibniz, there is both the concept of an individual-in-a-world and the concept of an individual that is not the concept of an individual in-a-world" (159). (This is spelled out explicitly on page 158.)

At this point in the argument it is no longer clear whether a person is a metaphysical or a moral notion. I tend to think that as a moral notion it may be more promising to approach the question of the choice between alternatives. Nevertheless, this approach should also be pursued despite its potential problems. Its most troubling aspect in my opinion is the treatment of the notion of an individual as a generic notion (or as a genus term). But let's put these problems aside for the moment. Instead, let us grant Savage the validity of this approach and ask whether it is helpful in making room for the real choice of created, personalized individuals (in-a-world). In this approach, can created individuals (or persons) really act differently, such that the word 'can' is stronger than the usual logical possibility, (i.e., such that contrary action does not involve a contradiction)?

As far as I understand, the answer to this question is no. It is not clear what has been gained if the complete concept of a person still logically includes all its future activities and properties (or all truths about it), as Savage acknowledges (177).<sup>7</sup> It appears that the relation between a person and its complete concept is not all that different from that of a created individual and its complete concept. And it would be redundant to repeat Arnauld's question about the creation of Adam at this juncture.

I would imagine that Savage would respond that his motivation is to make sense

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of counterfactual claims about Adam. Viewing our Adam as a particular person different from many other possible Adams does just that. But even if we considered Adam\* as a different person or a different individual-in-a-world\*, all truths about this Adam\* would be fixed and predetermined in the possible world\*. Hence counterfactual claims with respect to Adam are about Adam\* (say the one who married Lilith). So presumably we can now make a claim that Adam can act differently based on the truth of this claim in another possible world. Thus, we have the logical possibility of a different person, identified as the generic individual Adam, acting differently. However, this comes too close to the claim that, in a different possible world another possible individual (make him as similar to Adam as you like) would act differently than our Adam.

This makes me wonder whether we can obtain the same result, namely, the logical possibility of Adam acting differently, at a lower cost. I am thinking of course of the familiar line of defense according to which the contingency of truths about our Adam depends on the logical possibility that God would not have created him at all and instead would have realized the second-best world? After all, even according to Savage's view, God chooses not to create the world in which Adam\* is a member.

So what have we gained by anchoring the contingency defense in claims about different possible persons rather than in the possibility of creating a different possible world? Surely not a real alternative for Adam not to sin. What we have gained is an alternative route for making sense of the logical possibility of Adam not sinning. And perhaps we have strengthened the intuitive view that this Adam could—as every one of us senses himself able to—act differently. But I am not sure of even this since within this approach our created Adam has no real choices at all. Is the price of Savage's proposal worth paying? I leave this question to the readers of this interesting book. For my part, I would stress that all these moves seem to take place within the much wandered labyrinth of Leibnizian freedom. And, as far as I can judge, our way out of this fascinating labyrinth is not in sight.

In closing I note that Savage does not mention issues concerning the development of Leibniz's views. He makes free use of the Leibnizian corpus without any reference to the period in question. Despite the current trend in the history of philosophy, and especially within Leibnizian scholarship, I think this practice can sometimes be justified. But Savage does not provide us with an explicit justification for using it here. More problematic to my mind is the free use of passages from different contexts in one place (e.g., pp. 39-41, 62, 86-87). This method of juxtaposing citations runs the risk of misunderstanding since the passages are far

removed from their original contexts.

Ohad Nachtomy  
Department of Philosophy  
Bar-Ilan University  
Ramat Gan 52900 Israel  
ohadn@telhai.ac.il

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> For a recent attempt to clarify Leibniz's notion of a Labyrinth (though not only in relation to the problem of freedom) see Cristina Marrasi, "Leibniz and his metaphorical labyrinths," forthcoming in the proceedings of the Colloque: "Leibniz et le langage," Rennes 6-9 March 2002, F. Neff (ed.) Paris: Vrin, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> He writes: "In this book I examine arguments marshaled in support of the view that Leibniz denied or should have denied that God can conceive of individuals behaving otherwise and refute them" (13). On the other hand, the commentators whose arguments Savage sets out to refute in his book "travel a number of routes to the conclusion that Leibnizian individuals cannot *really*, or in an 'interesting' way behave otherwise" (11). Thus, I assume that Savage is not merely defending the weak thesis that God can conceive of individuals behaving otherwise but also that individuals can really act otherwise. The issue remains unclear.

<sup>3</sup> Following are some texts in which Leibniz made this point (Savage cites them, as well as some others, on pages 84-85):

"[O]ne must attribute to [Adam] a concept so complete that everything that can be attributed to him can be deduced from it... It follows that he would not have been our Adam, but another, if had experienced other events, for nothing prevents us from saying that he would be another. He is therefore another." (G II, 42; LA 46)

"But someone will object, whence comes it that this man will assuredly sin? The reply is easy. It is that otherwise it would not be this man." (G IV, 455; L 322)

"You will object that it is possible for you to ask why God did not give you more strength than he has. I answer: if he had done that, you would not exist, for he would have produced not you but another creature." (Grua 327)

<sup>4</sup> "Leibniz's God has in mind perfectly clearly and distinctly what an individual is both before and after he imposes on it an individual law" (178).

<sup>5</sup> I am simply rephrasing Arnauld's question regarding the creation of Adam.



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<sup>6</sup> In a typical passage (which Savage cites on page 7), Leibniz writes: "...to be morally compelled by wisdom, to be bound by consideration of good is to be free; it is not compulsion in the metaphysical sense. And metaphysical necessity alone, as I observed so many times, is opposed to freedom" (*Theodicy*, 236). The distinction between metaphysical and moral necessity is strikingly absent from Savage's discussion.

<sup>7</sup> "These observations are consistent with Leibniz's view that a complete individual is an individual determined in all respects, down to the very last details" (177).