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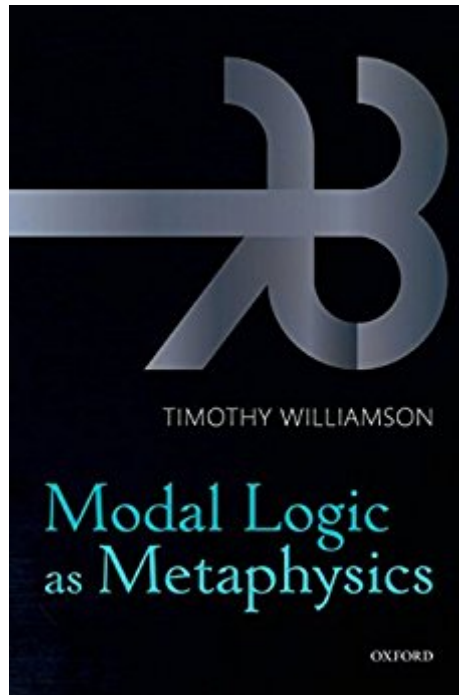
Modal Logic As Metaphysics

TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON

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as Metaphysics

OXFORD

Synopsis

Are there such things as merely possible people, who would have lived if our ancestors had acted differently? Are there future people, who have not yet been conceived? Questions like those raise deep issues about both the nature of being and its logical relations with contingency and change. In Modal Logic as Metaphysics, Timothy Williamson argues for positive answers to those questions on the basis of an integrated approach to the issues, applying thetechnical resources of modal logic to provide structural cores for metaphysical theories. He rejects the search for a metaphysically neutral logic as futile. The book contains detailed historical discussion of how the metaphysical issues emerged in the twentieth century development of quantified modal logic,through the work of such figures as Rudolf Carnap, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Arthur Prior, and Saul Kripke. It proposes higher-order modal logic as a new setting in which to resolve such metaphysical questions scientifically, by the construction of systematic logical theories embodying rival answers and their comparison by normal scientific standards. Williamson provides both a rigorous introduction to the technical background needed to understand metaphysical questions in quantified modal logic andan extended argument for controversial, provocative answers to them. He gives original, precise treatments of topics including the relation between logic and metaphysics, the methodology of theory choice in philosophy, the nature of possible worlds and their role in semantics, plural quantificationcompared to quantification into predicate position, communication across metaphysical disagreement, and problems for truthmaker theory.

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Customer Reviews

Timothy Williamson's *Knowledge and Its Limits* was *the* book of analytic philosophy in the 2000s. Williamson's cleverly constructed "real analysis" of knowing, which took the concept of knowledge as primitive and rigorously presented standard epistemological problems from that perspective -- often reaching counter-intuitive conclusions about what we don't know we know, or can't know by definition -- set many a young philosopher their tasks in the field. In the 2010s Williamson would like to do it again for metaphysics, using the modal logic developed in the second half of the 20th century to clearly set out a fundamental metaphysical debate between "necessitists" (who claim everything that is necessarily has the structure it has) and "contingentists" (those who view the way our actual world is as a relatively brute fact not underwritten by a larger metaphysical structure) and partially resolve it. It is not to be.*Modal Logic as Metaphysics* discusses many interesting logical systems and their possible metaphysical significance, but the clarity Kripkean model theory initially lent to modal issues in the propositional and first-order cases does not carry over to the baroque systems of Williamson's fancy, which combine so many complicated and poorly-defined features that they are no more useful than a Rorschach blot in determining "what there is". Quantified modal logic appeared *de novo* in the papers of Ruth Barcan Marcus in the 1940s, and one particular formula is associated with her formalization, a "Barcan Formula" that indicates that if it is possible that there is *something* which has a property F, there is something which *possibly* has the property F.

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