

Andy Egan and Brian Weatherson, eds.

Epistemic Modality.

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This book comprises a number of papers on epistemic modality, treating deep philosophical questions such as what are epistemic possibilities as opposed to metaphysical possibilities. These matters are considered from various philosophical stances, such as contextualism, relativism, and expressivism.

As Kent Bach says in his paper, the question whether a state of affairs is epistemically possible depends on a perspective, a body of information: “epistemic possibility sentences that mention perspective [...] semantically express propositions that include perspectives [...] as constituents. These are classical propositions, absolutely true or false [...] The semantic puzzle about epistemic possibility arises with sentences that do not mention perspectives”.

David Chalmers discusses the nature of the ‘epistemic space’ of epistemic possibilities (‘scenarios’). For him epistemic possibilities depend on the way of knowing of the subject (“the various different standards for knowledge”). When it is epistemically possible (for a subject) that p, there is an epistemically possible scenario (for the subject) in which p. These scenarios constitute an epistemic space.

If a subject does not know anything, all scenarios are epistemically possible for the subject. Knowledge of the subject excludes certain scenarios from the epistemic space. In particular, Chalmers treats strengths and weaknesses of two proposals of the nature of epistemic space: ‘metaphysical’ and ‘epistemic’ constructions of scenarios. Here ‘metaphysical’ pertains to ‘what might have been the case’, while ‘epistemic’ pertains to ‘what might be the case’, which are related but really distinct notions: the former has a counterfactual flavour while the latter does not.

Von Finkel and Gillies discuss so-called BEMs, i.e. bare epistemic modals. These are modals where the modal base B supplied by the context is epistemic and thus the denotation of B is the set of worlds compatible with the relevant information state, without further restrictions (this is the meaning of ‘bare’ in this context), available to a contextually relevant group of agents. However, as the authors argue, given a context, there are multiple ways of drawing the group boundaries, and the context often does not decide which of these is to be preferred. So it is indeterminate which group is quantified over by bare epistemic modals, contrary to what is usually assumed (in the ‘canon’).

Frank Jackson argues that a Two-Space versus a One-Space approach towards epistemic possibilities is a mistake. (These correspond roughly to the epistemic/conceptual and metaphysical constructions of Chalmers, respectively.) He ends his paper on a positive note, however. He thinks in terms of one space “carved out in two different ways”: as A-intensions or

C-intensions. A-intensions are possibilities where a sentence is true under the supposition that they are actual, while for C-intensions the latter supposition does not hold.

Next, John MacFarlane argues that none of the standard accounts of epistemic modals works well. Many problems remain, such as issues that arise in compositional semantics, e.g., regarding the interaction of epistemic modals with temporal modifiers (tensed epistemic models).

In the next paper, Jonathan Shaeffer defends a view that he calls “meaning perspectivalism”. Here, perspective plays a semantic role with respect to the proposition expressed by sentences with taste predicates or epistemic modals. This paper contains an overview of the space of theories about the semantic role of perspective by contrasting several stances on this, after which the author defends a contextualist form of meaning perspective for taste predicates as well as epistemic modals, meaning that sentences with these elements may express different propositions in different contexts.

Robert Stalnaker is concerned with indicative conditional assertions and the relation between speech acts and the propositions and propositional attitudes that are expressed in them. In particular, he compares truth-conditional and non-truth-conditional accounts of conditionals, focusing on the case of indicative conditional assertions.

Next, Eric Swanson talks about subjective uncertainty. He argues in particular that a number of desiderata should be taken into account when theorizing about the language of subjective uncertainty—for instance, an explanation should be given for ‘Quine’s third grade of modal involvement’ (the issue of using a necessity operator on open formulae) exhibited by epistemic modals and by epistemic adjectives. The author argues that taking these constraints together has severe implications for theorizing about the language of subjective uncertainty.

Stephen Yablo explores the prospects for a unified theory of deontic and epistemic modality. Yablo discusses several problems with the standard ‘static’ semantics including the epistemic modal ‘may/might’ and proposes a dynamic semantics in the style of Veltman’s update semantics (for defaults). Yablo’s semantics nevertheless differs from that of Veltman in order to repair some of the strange properties of ‘might p’ in Veltman’s approach. Yablo’s so-called cancelation theory is inspired by an analogous problem with deontic modals addressed by David Lewis: issuing commands shrink or expand Lewis’ sphere of permissibility. Yablo then applies these ideas to the epistemic analogue ‘may/might’ of permission.

Finally, Seth Yalcin sets out an alternative to factualism for epistemic modality. Factualist descriptivism is the view that epistemic modal talk serves to describe reality, i.e., to represent the world, or one’s situation in the world, as being a certain way. Yalcin’s nonfactualism about epistemic possibility maintains that to believe that something is possible is not to take the world to be one way rather than another, which is to say, it is not to think a certain kind of fact obtains; it is for one’s state of mind to have a certain global property, not reducible to a condition on worlds.

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