



'Transient Truths', by Berit Brogaard

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3 Brogaard, Berit, *Transient Truths: An Essay in the Metaphysics of*
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5 *Propositions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. ix + 195, £45
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7 (hardback).
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12 The exact subject matter of this book might strike some readers with surprise,
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14 given its subtitle, as many aspects of the metaphysics of propositions receive
15
16 almost no attention. Certainly, there is little here for those who take
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18 metaphysics to predominantly concern issues of ontology, where perplexing
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20 questions as to the nature of propositions that we might find in classic debates
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22 about, for example, realist versus anti-realist accounts of propositions, go
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24 almost entirely unexamined. Instead, in her Introduction, Brogaard (p. 5, fn. 1)
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26 explicitly states she does not intend to defend a particular account of what
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28 propositions are; preferring to stipulate that propositions are just whatever fills
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30 any of the conceptual roles commonly associated with propositions. I think
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32 there are problems that arise from this lack of engagement over the
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34 connection between ontological status and conceptual role that I shall return
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36 to later but, returning to the matter at hand, the focus of Brogaard's book
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38 should instead be seen primarily as being about the *contents* of propositions.
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45 This focus might strike some as being more akin to the philosophy of
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47 language than to metaphysics. However, Brogaard has a very particular
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49 angle: to defend temporalism as the theory that can best account for
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51 propositional contents. Temporalism is perhaps best understood as the
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53 position directly opposed to the more orthodox view of eternalism, advocated
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55 by Frege and many others, that the contents of beliefs, assertions, etc. are
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3 propositions that have their truth value eternally. By contrast, temporalism
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5 allows for propositional content that can change truth value over time, a view
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7 famously associated with Prior. The book is arranged so that a defence of
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9 temporal content as propositional content can be levied in a way that supports
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11 the requirements demanded by the major conceptual roles for propositions
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13 (semantic values of truth-evaluable sentences, objects of the attitudes, etc.).
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15 The result is a detailed, often technical, and certainly ambitious account as to
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17 how temporalism can counter the many criticisms eternalists have levelled
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19 against it.
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25 Brogaard opens in chapter 1 with a brief characterization of temporalism in
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27 terms of fulfilling the demands of the first conceptual role we often require
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29 propositions to play; that of being the semantic value of truth-evaluable
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31 sentences. This starts with the basic Fregean position that all propositions
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33 have their truth-value eternally and cannot have different truth values at
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35 different times. Sentences without explicit time determination can only
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37 express a proposition (*gedanken* or thought) when the time of their utterance
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39 is taken into account, for example, the sentence 'This tree is covered with
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41 green leaves' can only express a complete proposition with the context of its
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43 utterance is taken into account, so if it was uttered at 3pm on 6th June 2013
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45 then it expresses the proposition that *this tree is covered with green leaves at*
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47 *3pm on 6th June 2013*. Temporalism, by contrast, is the view that propositions
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49 may vary in truth-value over time, so that the proposition expressed (relative
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51 to a context of use) by the sentence 'This tree is covered with green leaves',
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53 may be true in June and false in December. It is important to note that
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3 temporalism is not the claim that all propositions are temporal, as there are
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5 still plenty of propositions that we recognise must have their truth-value
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7 eternally, such as those which do contain specific time adverbials, or those we
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9 take to be necessarily true (for example, that 4 is greater than 2), etc. Rather,
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11 it is the view that some propositional contents are temporal. Brogaard then
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13 argues that eternalism and temporalism, despite these differences, share the
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15 same metalinguistic truth conditions where there is no embedding within the
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17 scope of a propositional attitude verb.
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23 This leads Brogaard to defend temporalism against the many objections to it
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25 that are based on the role of propositions as the object of attitude reports,
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27 such as belief. The specific focus for chapter 2 is Mark Richard's case against
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29 temporalism based on the obvious invalidity of certain arguments involving
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31 belief claims that would turn out to be valid under temporalism, for example:
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36 (P1) Mary believed that Nixon was president

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38 (P2) Mary still believes everything she once believed

39
40 *Therefore*

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42 (C) Mary believes that Nixon is president.
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47 According to Richard, the temporalist must regard this as valid because
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49 temporalism regards the objects of belief to be temporally neutral rather than
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51 specified (as the eternalist does).
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3 The defence Brogaard offers in light of these objections is to develop an
4 account of belief retention – how we continue to believe the same proposition
5 over time. This starts with the counter-criticism of eternalism that we would
6 never be able to retain a sufficiently accurate memory of the fully-indexical
7 and temporal content of a proposition as the eternalist would conceive of it.
8 Instead, Brogaard offers an unusual means by which a temporalist can retain
9 beliefs: by standing in a belief relation to a proposition appropriately related to
10 the original object proposition but which does not actually have to be the
11 same proposition. Although this gives the temporalist a means of denying the
12 validity of arguments such as those raised by Richard, it seems to rest on a
13 confusion between a referent and a cognitive ability to remember accurately
14 that referent. The objects of our beliefs still might be eternal propositions with
15 all their concomitant temporal contents and it is to those we refer through the
16 medium of our hazy memories. Accounting for the possibility of such
17 confusion would have greatly aided the force of Brogaard's argument.
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38 Much of the rest of the book (chapters 4-7) is devoted to reviving and applying
39 Prior's theory of tense operators as a viable alternative to quantificational
40 theories as a means of accounting for verb tense and other linguistic
41 concerns. This starts in chapter 4 with a defence of an operator account of
42 tenses as being able to explain the empirical linguistic problems presented
43 against it by Jeffrey King, reasons which King viewed as motivating a shift
44 towards the quantifier approach and away from the early burgeoning attempt
45 at using tense operators. These concerns revolve around the fear that
46 predicate logic with sentential operators would require an incredibly complex
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3 tense logic to account for our use of tense in English. Brogaard's response is
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5 to outline how a simple Priorian tense logic can be just as elegant a treatment
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7 of tenses and temporal expressions as that offered by quantificational
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9 theories. Note that Brogaard's argument seems to aim at temporalism offering
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11 an account that functions as well as – but not significantly better than – the
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13 quantificational treatment, thereby providing us with an alternative but failing
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15 to give additional reason to prefer that treatment. Chapter 5 continues with a
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17 more general defence of this application of Prior's tense logic. This is seen as
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19 important for Brogaard's overall thesis – that accounting for tenses in English
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21 is vital for the success of temporalism because one of the main conceptual
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23 roles identified for propositions at the beginning of the book was that they act
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25 as the contents that intensional (modal or tense) operators operate on.
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32 Chapter 6 takes as its starting point Kaplan's arguments that the contents of
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34 sentences can change their truth-value across time, so that there are indeed
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36 tense operators in English which must therefore operate on temporal
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38 propositions, and initiates a defence of this position against eternalist
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40 objections that sentences have two kinds of content – temporal and eternal –
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42 of which only eternal content can be called propositional. Finally, in chapter 7,
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44 given that Brogaard claims to have shown how temporal propositions can play
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46 all the roles traditionally associated with eternal propositions, some account of
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48 those seemingly unequivocally eternal propositions is offered. This includes,
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50 for example, those expressed by present-tense sentences with time
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52 adverbials, such as "I am in England at 3pm on 6th June 2013", as well as
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54 those without time adverbials, such as "Socrates exists". According to
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3 Brogaard, this latter kind can express two kinds of content – temporal and
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5 eternal – relative to a context of use. As temporalism only requires that some
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7 propositions are temporal, the existence of some eternal propositions is not
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9 seen as problematic for this position.
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14 I cannot do justice here to the detail Brogaard puts into her revitalisation of
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16 Prior's tense operator theory and her attempts to meet each major
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18 counterexample levelled against temporalism. Although this is unquestioningly
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20 a highly accomplished treatment of the temporal contents of propositions,
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22 there remains a concerning lack of engagement as to the connection between
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24 the ontological status of propositions and the conceptual role or roles they are
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26 meant to play. The various traditional conceptual roles for propositions that
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28 Brogaard attributes to Frege (the semantic values of truth-evaluable
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30 sentences, the objects of the attitudes, the objects of
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32 agreement/disagreement, etc.) are only guaranteed to be roles that are
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34 played by the same entity because of Frege's reliance on thoughts as abstract
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36 objects, existing as eternal propositions in something akin to a Platonic realm.
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38 Whilst Brogaard claims that all these roles can be fulfilled by her account of
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40 temporal propositions, the question remains as to whether there could be
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42 propositions of this kind. Brogaard gives no genuine account of how these
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44 roles might connect together on a temporalist reading.
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52 This problem might be mitigated somewhat by appeal to what Brogaard calls
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54 a "minimalist view of propositions" (p. 6). Although she does not explicitly
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56 state what this consists in, it is implicitly characterized as the view that we
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3 require only a certain number of these conceptual roles to be fulfilled in order
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5 to classify the role-player as a proposition. Clearly, it is easier to establish an
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7 account where only some, rather than all, of these role constraints are met.
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9 However, the concern is that by identifying a multiplicity of conceptual roles
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11 and engaging in talk of 'minimalist' accounts of propositions, we are back in
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13 the realm of ontological commitment and this is exactly what Brogaard does
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15 not talk about. Hence, it is not clear that we are dealing with a *sui generis*
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17 object that can play all these roles or a number of different objects that each
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19 play one or more of these roles. At best, Brogaard's account tells us that if
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21 there are propositions then they can plausibly be considered to have temporal
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23 contents. That doesn't tell us whether there are such temporal propositions.
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25 Moreover, if an eternalist conception of propositions can fulfil these role
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27 constraints and also give us some form of ontological account, adopting
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29 temporalism without these underpinnings seems less enticing.
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36 Despite these concerns, as an attempt to revive Prior's theory, this is by far
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38 the most thorough and compelling account I have read and certainly provides
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40 us with good reason to re-assess the temporal content of propositions.
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47 Anthony Wrigley

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49 Keele University
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