

## Still No Guidance: Reply to Steglich-Petersen

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In a recent article in this journal, Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen criticizes an argument we have called the “no-guidance argument”. He claims that our argument fails because it (1) “presupposes a much too narrow understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behavior” and (2) “betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the point of the truth norm” (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 279).

If these claims could be substantiated, the no-guidance argument would lose all interest. But Steglich-Petersen’s attempt at substantiating them fails. The suggested sense in which the truth norm can guide behavior appears to be so wide as to undermine a basic distinction essential to rule-following or norm-guidance: that between merely acting in accordance with a norm or rule and being guided by it. Moreover, it remains unclear how the truth norm could possibly provide an answer to the question whether it – rather than some other, possible norm for belief – is valid.

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In a recent paper in this journal, Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen makes a second attempt at showing that the argument we have called “the no-guidance argument” fails (Steglich-Petersen 2013). The no-guidance argument concerns the idea that it is constitutive of belief to be governed by some version of the truth norm:

(T) One ought to believe that  $p$  if and only if  $p$ .

The no-guidance argument is an argument to the conclusion that – on an ordinary, very intuitive understanding of guidance – (T) cannot guide belief formation.<sup>1</sup> In his first attack, Steglich-Petersen directly went after our argument (Steglich-Petersen 2010). That mostly missed the target, but we were very happy to admit that the original formulation of the argument (in our 2009) had indeed been sketchy, and we replied, among other things, by spelling it out in greater detail (in our 2010). Since the argument is quite short, we shall simply repeat it here:

To be guided by a norm or rule  $R$  in our performances intuitively requires that  $R$  influences, or motivates, or provides reasons for, these performances.

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<sup>1</sup> As formulated here, (T) is obviously too strong. That does not matter for present concerns, however – the no-guidance argument does not depend on the precise formulation of the truth norm.

Correspondingly, to be capable of guiding performances, *R* intuitively needs to 'tell us' what to do under given circumstances. Our generic guiding rule thus can be taken to have the form

(R) Do *X* when in *C*.

When deliberating whether to *X*, a subject *S* then can look to (R) for guidance. In order to get guidance as to whether to *X* from (R), however, *S* first needs to form a belief as to whether *C*—we shall follow Steglich-Petersen in calling *C* (R)'s 'antecedent condition' — is fulfilled. If it is, this belief and (R) together provide *S* with a reason to *X*. For instance, being guided by the rule 'buy low, sell high' requires, among other things, forming a belief about the market. If I believe that the market is at a low, the rule gives me a reason to buy. This belief may of course be false, but this does not prevent the rule from influencing, or motivating, my behaviour. Rather, it just means that, if the belief is false, I will (inadvertently) do the wrong thing. Guidance does not necessarily amount to correct performance.

But if we apply this intuitive picture of guidance to a norm like (T), strange things happen. (T) is supposed to provide guidance as to whether to believe that *p*. And just as with 'buy low, sell high', being guided by (T) requires forming a belief as to whether its antecedent condition is fulfilled. But for (T), determining whether *C* is fulfilled amounts to determining whether *p* is true. That is, it requires forming a belief as to whether *p*. This makes it intuitively very strange to think of (T) as guiding belief formation, for two related reasons.

For one thing, in order to receive guidance as to whether to believe *p* from (T), I must first form a belief as to whether *p*. But that was the very question I wanted guidance on! Once I have formed a belief as to whether *p*, I simply do not need such guidance anymore. More precisely, since the very belief the formation of which (T) is supposed to influence, or motivate, needs to have been formed before (T) can exert any such influence, (T) cannot influence, or motivate, its formation.

But it is not only that (T)'s guidance, so to speak, necessarily comes too late. (T), secondly, is such that whatever conclusion I come to as to whether *p*, (T) 'tells me' that that is the belief I ought to form. That is, whenever I conclude that *p* is true, (T) 'gives me a reason' to believe that *p*. And whenever I conclude that not-*p*, it 'gives me a reason' to believe not-*p*. Hence, (T) never gives me a reason to believe anything but what I have already come to believe anyway. Intuitively, no more guidance is to be had from (T) than from an oracle that invariably tells you to figure out what to do yourself (Glüer & Wikforss 2010, 758f).

In his second attack, Steglich-Petersen in effect accepts the no-guidance argument in its entirety – but nevertheless claims it fails. How can that be? The supposed failure is twofold: (1) our argument "presupposes a much too narrow understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behavior" (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 279). The claim thus is that even though we are perfectly right in claiming that (T) cannot guide belief formation in the intuitive sense of guidance that we spelled out, there is a "wider" sense of guidance in which it can. And (2)

our argument “betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the point of the truth norm” (ibid.). Presumably, (1) and (2) are supposed to be connected in the following way: Once the real point of the truth norm is recognized, the sense in which it can guide becomes visible, too. Let’s therefore start with (2).

What *is* the point of the truth norm? To answer this question, Steglich-Petersen considers what kind of question the truth norm could *provide a helpful answer to*. We have in effect argued that it isn’t particularly helpful when wondering whether to believe *p*. Which, it seems to us, is a very natural thing to expect help with from a norm supposed to guide belief formation. Thus, we hoped it was at least somewhat interesting to point out that this kind of help wasn’t forthcoming. Steglich-Petersen agrees that it isn’t forthcoming. But he thinks there *is* a – quite different – question the truth norm does in fact provide a helpful answer to. So what Steglich-Petersen in effect suggests is not that our argument fails, but that, at the end of the day, it isn’t of much interest – a matter upon which we do not presume to pronounce. What does interest us now, is whether Steglich-Petersen succeeds in showing that there is a question the truth norm is helpful with and, thus, a sense in which it can guide.

So, if the truth norm is the answer, what’s the question? Here is *one way* of understanding Steglich-Petersen. He writes that “the truth norm does provide a helpful answer if you were wondering what sorts of considerations would be relevant for determining whether to believe that *p* in the first place” (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 283). To see the point of the truth norm, that is, we must not ask, as we did, whether it can guide if valid<sup>2</sup> – rather, we must take a step back and ask *whether it is valid*. More precisely, we need to ask whether the truth norm *as opposed to any other possible norm for belief* is valid: “the relevant contrast,” Steglich-Petersen explains, “is any of the many possible norms for belief which *do not* let the correctness of belief depend on truth, but on some other property” (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 281). Steglich-Petersen thus presupposes that there *is* a

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<sup>2</sup> Here’s what we wrote in our (2010): “The no-guidance argument (...) is not directed at the validity of the truth norm in general, but targets specifically the idea that such a norm, if valid, would provide guidance for belief formation” (758).

multitude of conceivable or possible norms for belief.<sup>3,4</sup> His favorite example is the “pleasantness norm”:

(P) One ought to believe that *p* if and only if believing *p* is pleasant.

Given that any of these norms could be the norm of belief, this multitude confronts us with the question of *what the correctness of belief depends on* – for instance, whether it is truth or pleasantness. If this is one’s question, Steglich-Petersen claims, the truth norm provides a helpful answer: “It answers this open question by telling us that when considering whether to believe some proposition, one should let this depend on the truth of that proposition” (281). The truth norm, in other words, is to help us with the question *which norm it is that is valid, or in force, for belief*: “If one were in doubt as to whether the correctness of belief depended on truth or pleasantness, it would clearly be guiding to *become convinced of the truth norm’s validity*” (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 281, *emph. added*). But of course the truth norm says nothing about its own validity, and even if it did, it would be quite obscure how it could “convince us” of its own validity. If the basic question concerning the norms of belief really is which of all the possible norms is in fact valid for belief, it is clearly not any of the norms themselves that will provide us with a helpful answer.<sup>5</sup>

We shall therefore now turn to (1) above and consider a *second way* of understanding Steglich-Petersen. What he is ultimately after is a notion of guidance that is *wider, i.e. more inclusive*, than ours. Let’s call this wider notion of guidance “SP-guidance”. The point of SP-guidance is precisely to include the very performances that are excluded by our notion of guidance. Clearly, the performances we were concerned with were not things like becoming convinced that the truth norm, as opposed to, say, the pleasantness norm is valid for belief. Rather, we were concerned with ordinary, common and garden “first-order” belief formation. The suggestion we want to investigate now is that Steglich-

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<sup>3</sup> Steglich-Petersen calls alternative norms for belief both “conceivable” and “possible” in his text, but does not indicate what he takes the relation between these concepts to be.

<sup>4</sup> Presumably, this means that anyone taking the validity of the truth norm to be a *conceptual* matter is also bound to miss the basic point of the norm.

<sup>5</sup> This would hold even if there were only one possible norm of belief. What we need “help” with is precisely the step from possibility to validity. This either is not an open question – in which case we cannot get help because we don’t need any – or it is an open question – in which case the norm itself cannot help us.

Petersen's considerations concerning the validity of the truth norm are mere props for appreciating the right kind of contrast between different forms of first-order belief formation.<sup>6</sup>

The relevant contrast then is that between the outcomes of two different "processes" or procedures for finding out whether to believe that  $p$ : One involves "following the truth norm" and finding out whether  $p$  is true, and the other involves "following the pleasantness norm" and finding out whether believing  $p$  is pleasant. Whether or not any of these processes results in a new belief being formed after finding out whether the relevant norm's antecedent condition is fulfilled, is of no importance here. What is important, according to Steglich-Petersen, is whether the processes can lead to different outcomes, i.e. to different beliefs being formed. According to him, this is clearly the case: the subject "would have *ended up with a different belief*, had she followed the truth norm rather than the norm based on pleasantness" (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 282, *emph. added*).

From our perspective, the no-guidance argument is part of a larger philosophical landscape connecting it, among other things, with the rule-following considerations. The big background question to our debate with Steglich-Petersen thus can be formulated as follows: Is belief formation a form of rule-following? Or: Is belief formation an essentially rule-guided activity? As is well known, to understand rule-following, it is essential to distinguish being *guided* by a rule or norm and *merely acting in accordance with one*. Thus, you are not following the rule "when moving down corridors, place one leg in front of the other" just because you in fact do place one leg in front of the other when moving down a corridor. Most likely, that's just how you usually do it. No rule influences your doing it that way rather than any other – you merely act in accordance with the rule just formulated, but you are not guided by it. And if you are not guided by it, you aren't following it, either. From this perspective, the no-guidance argument shows that – on an intuitive conception of guidance – the truth norm

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<sup>6</sup> As to the plausibility of this interpretation, witness the continuation of the passage quoted last: "[I]t would clearly be guiding to become convinced of the truth norm's validity," Steglich-Petersen writes, "since one would then direct one's attention towards whether  $p$  is true, rather than towards whether believing  $p$  would be pleasant, when trying to find out whether to believe that  $p$ " (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 281).

*cannot be followed because it cannot guide.* The specific question at issue between Steglich-Petersen and us now is whether there is a wider notion of guidance – SP-guidance – on which the truth norm can be followed.

If that is the question, it obviously cannot be answered by pointing out that a subject  $S_1$  whose belief formation accords with the truth norm has rather different beliefs from a subject  $S_2$  whose belief formation accords with the pleasantness norm. Of course, that's the case – nobody denies that. But it does nothing to show that the relevant difference is, or can be, the result of following the truth norm.<sup>7</sup> Equally obviously, the question cannot be answered by using a conditional of the following form and asserting the antecedent: '*If following the truth norm can result in different beliefs than following the pleasantness norm then the truth norm can influence behavior*' – *that* would just beg the question at issue. We do not think Steglich-Petersen actually argues in either of these two clearly misguided ways. Rather, Steglich-Petersen tries to articulate a notion of norm-influenced behaviour on which it will be intuitively plausible that the truth norm can indeed guide and be followed. He argues that “a relatively uncontroversial understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behavior would have it, roughly, that”

(D) “A norm  $N$  of the form ‘In  $C$ , do  $X$ ’ can influence a subject  $S$ ’s behaviour with respect to  $X$  only if  $S$  following  $N$  can make a difference to  $S$ ’s  $X$ -ing” (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 281).<sup>8</sup>

(D) is quite possibly not the easiest thing to interpret. We take it that Steglich-Petersen is after a notion of norm-influenced behaviour that is weaker than the intuitive notion of guidance we used, but strong enough to be intuitively *sufficient* for rule following. Here is how he illustrates what he has in mind:

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<sup>7</sup> We are on record for defending the Davidsonian claim that in order to have any beliefs whatsoever, a subject’s belief formation needs to show a certain degree of accordance with the “norms” of rationality (see our 2009). This does not at all commit us to the claim that a subject’s belief formation is, or needs to be, guided by the norms of rationality.

<sup>8</sup> According to an anonymous referee, our reading of Steglich-Petersen here is “quite uncharitable”. The referee thinks that (D) involves a slip on Steglich-Petersen’s part; according to them, (D) has an ‘only if’ where Steglich-Petersen pretty clearly intended an ‘if’. But as we just explained, this would pretty clearly amount to begging the question at issue. We therefore find it more charitable to take Steglich-Petersen at his word here.

Given the above comments about the point of the truth norm, it should be clear that it could influence one's behaviour, i.e. beliefs, in this sense. For suppose that *S* instead of accepting the truth norm accepts [(P)]. In applying this norm, *S* will first seek to find out whether believing *p* would be pleasant. We can imagine that *S* comes to the conclusion (and thus forms the belief) that believing *p* would be unpleasant, and, in accordance with the norm, does not form the belief that *p*. Had *S* instead followed the truth norm, she would have sought to find out whether *p*. If we suppose that she comes to the conclusion that *p*, she will deem believing *p* correct. Given that she at this stage in the process already believes that *p*, this will not result in a new belief. But it is nevertheless the case that she would have ended up with a different belief, had she followed the truth norm rather than [(P)] (Steglich-Petersen 2013, 281f).

It should be immediately clear from the description of the imagined scenario that the way Steglich-Petersen formulates (D) not only is somewhat unfortunate, but also leaves out material that he actually uses. What he ultimately seems to have in mind is something like this:

(D\*) Acceptance of a norm *N* of the form 'In *C*, do *X*' can influence a subject *S*'s behaviour with respect to *X* in the sense of making a difference to *S*'s *X*-ing only if *S* can follow *N*.

Even so, we suspect that (D\*) gets things exactly backwards. Steglich-Petersen does not succeed in spelling out a notion of norm influence that is intuitively sufficient for rule-following or norm guidance.

A first observation is that Steglich-Petersen's description of the scenario above does not even establish that accepting (P) *influences* *S*'s belief formation. As described, *S* accepts (P), considers the pleasantness of believing *p*, concludes it would be unpleasant – *and* does not form the belief that *p*. As Steglich-Petersen notes, this is *in accordance* with (P), but of course it does not follow that *S* *followed* (P). For all we know, she might not have formed the belief for some reason totally unconnected with her acceptance of (P), or even for no reason whatsoever. Someone might have knocked her on the head at just the right moment, for instance.

Steglich-Petersen seems aware of this. In a footnote, he in effect adds a further requirement: There must be some causal *mechanism* that is responsible

for whether the relevant belief is formed or not. It remains a bit mysterious how this is supposed to work, but let's just grant that in the described scenario, resulting from some such mechanism would ensure that acceptance of (P) *influenced* *S*'s behavior. Let's assume also that if *S* were to accept (T) instead, a mechanism would influence *S*'s behaviour such that different behaviour would result. But even if we "causally fortify" (D\*) accordingly, i.e. even if we read "influence" as implying some (difference-making) belief-inducing causal mechanism, isn't it intuitively quite clear that, while such influence might well be necessary for rule-following, it is not sufficient?<sup>9</sup>

Imagine the following: A mad scientist has secretly (and wirelessly) hooked up *S*'s brain to a computer in such a way that if she accepts a norm making the correctness of believing *p* depend on property *F*, considers whether believing *p* would be *F*, and comes to the conclusion that it would not, her ability to believe *p* is (temporarily) blocked. In such a scenario, (P), if accepted, influences *S*'s belief formation in the way amounting to SP-guidance – but intuitively, *S* clearly does not follow (P). Even though accepting the truth norm instead of (P) would result in a difference to *S*'s belief formation, the way this difference is generated is no longer recognizable as falling under *any* intuitive notion of rule-guidance.<sup>10</sup> (D\*), even in its causally fortified version, gets things backwards. Intuitively, guidance implies influence, but influence can fall short of guidance. While we can derive the possibility of influence from the possibility of guidance, there is no reason to think that the opposite is true. The proper

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<sup>9</sup> This, it seems to us, is just one more instance of a point familiar from various attempts at causal analyses of intentional phenomena, most prominently maybe in the theories of action and perception. To be an instance of rule-following, it is not sufficient that acceptance of the rule (causally) influences the relevant performance. It needs to do so *in the right way*. And there just does not seem to be any (informative) way of spelling out what "the right way" precisely amounts to, no way in which Steglich-Petersen could take whatever is required for following a rule or norm and "just build it into his description of the scenario" as an anonymous referee suggests.

<sup>10</sup> We hope this answers an anonymous referee's worry that the notion of SP-guidance might be quite fine for Steglich-Petersen's theoretical purposes. If, contrary to our assumption, Steglich-Petersen is not after a notion of norm or rule guidance intuitively recognizable as such, we have no quarrel with him. Of course acceptance of a norm can make some causal difference to belief formation – pretty much anything can. But it's very hard to see how that would show that we have missed the very point of the truth norm. As Steglich-Petersen argues from what he takes to be "a relatively uncontroversial understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behaviour" (281), and explicitly tries to convince the reader that the observations we offer in support of the no-guidance argument, while correct, "clearly [do] not prevent the truth norm from being guiding" (ibid.), interpreting him as indeed being after a sense of guidance that is intuitively recognizable as such seems eminently plausible to us.



conclusion of these considerations is *not* that our conception of guidance is too narrow but that Steglich-Petersen's is too wide.<sup>11</sup>

**References:**

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<sup>11</sup> We would like to thank two anonymous referees for their comments.