Still No Guidance: Reply to Steglich-Petersen

Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss
Stockholm University

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.¹ 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 to spell it out in greater detail in our reply (i.e. our 2010). Since the argument is nevertheless 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. 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

¹ 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.
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\(^2\) – 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 multitude of conceivable or possible norms for belief.\(^3\)\(^4\) 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 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).

\(^2\) 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).

\(^3\) 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.

\(^4\) 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.
This, it seems to us, is to conflate different levels. The truth norm says nothing about its own validity – or that of any other norm. Moreover, even if it did, it is quite obscure how it – or any other norm – could do anything to “convince us” of its own validity. For while the truth norm would “tell us” to let belief depend on truth, the pleasantness norm at the same time “tells us” to let it depend on pleasantness. This is nothing like a rational argument where both sides provide you with reasons for doing what they tell you to. Rather, this is like a screaming contest – you ask a bunch of norms which of them is valid and they all scream “Me! Me!” 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.\(^5\) Pending further argument, we shall therefore remain agnostic as to whether there is any question the truth norm provides a helpful answer to.

What Steglich-Petersen is ultimately after, however, is a notion of guidance that is *wider, i.e more inclusive* than ours. The point of its greater inclusiveness 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.

We shall therefore now consider a *second way* of understanding Steglich-Petersen. According to this interpretation, his 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. 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). The relevant contrast then is that between the outcomes of two

\(^5\) 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.
different “procedures” for finding out whether to believe that p: One procedure 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 procedures result 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 procedures can lead to different outcomes, i.e. to different beliefs being formed. And 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).

To arrive at this result, Steglich-Petersen argues that the following is “a relatively uncontroversial understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behaviour”:

(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.

(Cf. Steglich-Petersen 2013, 281.)

But as far as we can see, (D) in fact isn’t plausible at all. Intuitively, it seems to get matters exactly backwards. We shall try to explain why in some detail.

From our perspective, the no-guidance argument is a detail in a larger space of philosophical inquiry. Among other things, the no-guidance argument connects with the rule-following considerations. Thus, we thought of influencing or motivating behaviour as a necessary condition on following a norm. It is well known that, to understand what following rules or norms consists in, 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 or motivates your doing it that way rather than any other. You merely act in accordance with that rule, but you are not guided by it. The no-guidance argument then shows that – on an intuitive conception of guidance – the truth norm cannot be followed because it cannot guide.
This result has no consequences whatsoever regarding the question whether a subject’s belief formation in fact accords with the truth norm, or not.\(^6\) And it is fully compatible with claiming 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. But that there is such a difference does not show that following one of these norms can “make” the difference.

Steglich-Petersen does not claim that it shows this. But it will be instructive to keep the contrast between being guided by a rule and merely acting in accordance with it in mind. For Steglich-Petersen tries to convince us that following (T) can make a difference to what beliefs a subject forms by means of the following reasoning:

[S]uppose 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, emph. added).

In the imagined scenario, S accepts (P), considers the pleasantness of believing p, concludes it would be unpleasant – and does not form the belief that p. But from this, it does of course not follow that S followed (P). For all we know, she might not have formed the belief for some reason totally unconnected with (P), or even for no reason whatsoever. Someone might have knocked her on the head at just the right moment, for instance.

\(^6\) 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.
But probably that is not how the reasoning is supposed to go. Probably the reasoning is supposed to be premised on an instance of (D). The crucial inference would then be from (Dₐ) to (Dₖ):\footnote{More precisely, the reasoning would go first from “In the imagined scenario, (P) influences S’s belief formation” to (Dₐ) and then, from (Dₐ) and (D), to (Dₖ). How else could (D) be supposed to do any work here? Using it to infer (Dₐ) from (Dₖ) would amount to affirming the consequent.}

(Dₐ) Acceptance of (P) can influence a subject S’s belief formation.
(Dₖ) Following (P) can make a difference to S’s beliefs.

And mutatis mutandis for (T). Consequently, (T) can be followed, and hence (T) can guide. SP-guide, that is. However, Steglich-Petersen’s description of the scenario above not only does not establish that S follows (P) – it does not even establish that (P) influences S’s belief formation. 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. Isn’t it completely clear that while such influence might well be necessary for rule-following, rule-following is not necessary for there to be such influence? Isn’t this just one more instance of a point almost tiresomely familiar from various attempts at causal analyses of intentional phenomena, most prominetly 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 completing the analysis of following by means of spelling out what “the right way” precisely amounts to. But then, the presence of causal influence leaves it open that a performance is merely in accordance with the rule – rather than rule-guided. This is why (D) gets things precisely backwards. Intuitively, guidance implies influence, but influence can fall short of guidance. Therefore, there is reason to think we can derive the possibility of influence from the possibility of guidance – but there is no reason to think that the opposite is true.

One last point: Our reasoning might seem to presuppose – once more – the intuitive sense of guidance that Steglich-Petersen claims to be too narrow. But
trying to escape the conclusion that (D) has things backwards by means of a wider notion of guidance would just land Steglich-Petersen on the other horn of a dilemma: If (D) doesn’t have things backwards, the notion of rule-following or rule-guidance it employs has become so wide as to include instances of mere accordance with the relevant norm or rule. Such a conception of “guidance” undermines the very distinction on which rule-following essentially turns. The proper conclusion then is not that our conception of guidance is too narrow but that Steglich-Petersen’s is much too wide.

References: