

# The No Guidance Argument

by

ASBJØRN STEGLICH-PETERSEN

Aarhus University

FORTHCOMING IN *THEORIA*

*Abstract:* In a recent article, I criticized Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss' so-called 'no guidance argument' against the truth norm for belief, for conflating the conditions under which that norm recommends belief with the psychological state one must be in to apply the norm. In response, Glüer and Wikforss have offered a new formulation of the no guidance argument, which makes it apparent that no such conflation is made. However, their new formulation of the argument presupposes a much too narrow understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behavior, and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the point of the truth norm. Once this is taken into account, it becomes clear that the no guidance argument fails.

According to Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss' original version of the 'no guidance argument' (2009), any truth norm for belief, which makes a recommendation or prescription regarding belief in some proposition, based on the truth of that proposition, runs into difficulties when agents are to apply the norm to determine whether to adopt some particular belief. Suppose that the truth norm tells us to believe that *p* if and only if *p* is true.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty is, then, that in order to determine whether the norm recommends believing that *p*, the agent must first form a belief as to whether *p* is true. If the agent considers whether *p* is true, and forms the belief that *p*, the truth norm tells the agent to believe that *p*. And if the agent considers whether *p*, and forms the belief that not-*p*, the truth norm tells the agent to believe that not-*p*. As Glüer and Wikforss

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<sup>1</sup> There are several possible interpretations of the exact form and source of the truth norm for belief, but the no guidance argument is independent from these differences. My own preferred teleological interpretation is outlined and defended in my (2006a; 2006b; 2008b; 2009; 2011a).

conclude their first rather brisk presentation of the argument: “In other words, [the truth norm] tells [the agent] that if she believes that p, she ought to believe that p. It is rather obvious that no guidance can be had from such a norm” (2009: 44).<sup>2</sup>

In my initial criticism (Steglich-Petersen 2010), I interpreted their argument as making a point about the effective content of the truth norm: if we consider how agents might actually try to apply the norm, it becomes apparent that what the norm ‘really’ tells the agent, is something that is obviously false, i.e. “that if she believes that p, she ought to believe that p” (Glüer and Wikforss, *Op. Cit.*). But as I showed, when interpreted in this way, their argument relies on a false assumption. Suppose, along with Glüer and Wikforss, that objective norms (such as the truth norm) have the form ‘Do X when in C’, and call the condition C under which one is to X the ‘antecedent condition’. The argument then falsely assumes that just because one must form a belief as to whether or not the antecedent condition of an objective norm obtains in order to apply that norm, the antecedent condition must really be taken to be a *belief* to the effect that the antecedent condition obtains.

In their revised statement of the no guidance argument, Glüer and Wikforss make it clear, however, that they didn’t intend their central point to be that the content of the truth norm effectively becomes that we ought to believe that p if we already believe that p. Rather, they say, they intended their argument to establish that the truth norm is unable to guide beliefs, in the sense of *influencing*, *motivating*, or *providing reasons* for the formation of beliefs (2010). They present two related reasons for supposing this.

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<sup>2</sup> The No Guidance Argument is part of Glüer and Wikforss’ attempt to refute the thesis that semantic content and mental states are essentially normative. In my (2008a; 2011b), I have myself argued against the essential normativity of mental states, and thus share Glüer and Wikforss’ overall concern. However, one can coherently reject the essential normativity of mental states, including belief, while accepting that beliefs can be guided by the truth norm.

The first reason is that “in order to receive guidance as to whether to believe that  $p$  from [the truth norm], I must first form a belief as to whether  $p$ . But that was the very question I wanted guidance on!” (2010: 759). If they were right in this, it would indeed be a serious blow to the truth norm. Clearly, little guidance could be had from a norm that simply repeats the very question one wanted guidance on. There are two ways one could interpret the argument in this passage, but on both interpretations, the argument fails.

On the first interpretation, the argument rests on the claim that the question of *whether to believe that  $p$*  is identical to the question of *whether  $p$* , such that we can assume that the question we seek guidance on when applying to truth norm to decide whether to believe that  $p$ , is simply the question of whether  $p$  is true. As I pointed out by in my (2010), however, these questions are clearly is *not* identical. More importantly, it is quite possible to try to answer the question of whether to believe that  $p$ , without regarding the question of whether  $p$  is true as relevant to the issue. This would be the case, for example, if one thought that the correctness of believing  $p$  depended on the pleasantness of believing  $p$ , rather than the truth of  $p$ .

On the second and perhaps more charitable interpretation, the argument instead makes a point about the tasks one seeks guidance on from the truth norm. On this interpretation, what the argument points out is that when applying the truth norm to determine what to believe as to whether  $p$ , one must first determine whether  $p$  is true, but since determining whether  $p$  is true involves *forming a belief* as to whether  $p$  is true, it involves performing the very task one was seeking guidance on.

Although this observation is correct, it clearly doesn't prevent the truth norm from being guiding. To see this, note that applying the truth norm doesn't involve

forming a belief as to whether p in just any old way. It specifically involves forming a belief as to whether p, as part of an effort to *determine* whether p is true. This is of fundamental importance to understanding the basic point of the truth norm. The truth norm is intended as a guide for what to believe, where this question is initially understood as open to the possibility that something other than truth could decide what it would be correct to believe. 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. Again, the relevant contrast is any of the many possible norms for belief which *do not* let the correctness of beliefs depend on truth, but on some other property, thus resulting in conflicting advice, and different beliefs if followed. For example, a norm which makes the correctness of believing p depend on the pleasantness of believing p will often conflict with the truth norm, namely on all those occasions where propositions that it would be pleasant to believe are false. 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, 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. It is easy to miss this point, because we almost cannot help but take for granted that when considering whether to believe that p, we are interested in the truth of p. But the conceivability of other possible norms, which are in conflict with the truth norm, and would give rise to different beliefs if followed, shows that the truth norm can provide guidance in the relevant sense.

Still, one might worry that this guidance comes 'too late' to influence one's beliefs. As Glüer and Wikforss put it, expanding on the point quoted above, "since the very belief the formation of which [the truth norm] is supposed to influence, or

motivate, needs to have been formed *before* [the truth norm] can exert any such influence, [the truth norm] cannot influence, or motivate, its formation” (2010: 759). But this presupposes an unusually narrow understanding of what it takes for the acceptance of a norm to influence one’s behavior. I take it that a relatively uncontroversial understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behavior would have it, roughly, that a norm N of the form ‘Do X when in C’ can influence S’s behavior with respect to X only if S following N can make a difference to S’s X-ing. Given the above comments about the point of the truth norm, it should be clear that it could influence one’s behavior, i.e. beliefs, in this sense. For suppose that S instead of accepting the truth norm accepts a norm which says that she ought to believe that p if and only if believing p would be pleasant. 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 the norm based on pleasantness. So following the truth norm *can* make a difference to what one believes in the sense sketched above.

For Glüer and Wikforss’ point regarding influence to hold up, they would have to motivate a much narrower understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence

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<sup>3</sup> It is doubtful that one could form a belief that p directly in response to a norm such as this, which bases its recommendation on pleasantness rather than truth. But in this example, no belief is formed in response to the norm. Furthermore, nothing seems to depend on whether the belief in question is formed ‘directly’ in response to the norm, for our current purposes; it would be sufficient if the belief could be caused indirectly via some artificial belief-inducing mechanism.

behavior, namely, roughly, that a norm N of the form ‘Do X when in C’ can influence S’s behavior with respect to X only if following N can make a difference to S’s X-ing *compared to S’s X-ing after having determined whether C obtains*. As Glüer and Wikforss effectively show, following the truth norm cannot influence one’s beliefs in this narrow sense. But given the above, it is far from clear why this should make us think that the truth norm cannot guide beliefs. If following the truth norm can make a difference to one’s beliefs, compared to what one would come to believe as a consequence of following other norms, which contradict the truth norm, there seems to be a perfectly good sense in which the truth norm can influence, and in that sense guide beliefs.

The second reason offered in favor of the no guidance thesis by Glüer and Wikforss can be also be shown to be misguided, given the above clarification of the point of the truth norm. The argument here is that the truth norm “is such that whatever conclusion we come to as to whether p, [the truth norm] ‘tells me’ that that is the belief I ought to form. That is, whenever I conclude that p is true, [the truth norm] ‘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, [the truth norm] 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 [the truth norm] than from an oracle that invariably tells you to figure out what to do yourself” (2010: 759).

Glüer and Wikforss are of course right to the extent that the truth norm doesn’t provide any guidance on how to determine and thus come to the initial conclusion as to whether p is true, which will determine what the truth norm tells us to believe. If that were the question that the truth norm was meant to answer, the norm would indeed be as useless as an oracle telling you to figure out the answer for yourself. But, once

again, 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. We can easily imagine someone asking why the truth of p, and therefore evidence that p is true, should be especially relevant when considering whether to believe that p – why should it not instead be relevant that believing p would be pleasant? And, indeed, many philosophers have asked and taken seriously this very question.<sup>4</sup> In answer to such philosophers, the truth norm tells us that the truth of p, rather than any other consideration we might imagine, is what is of relevance when considering whether to believe that p. Obvious? Perhaps. But guiding nevertheless.

In conclusion, the revised no guidance argument against the truth norm fails. The argument relies on a much too narrow understanding of what it takes for a norm to influence behavior, and falsely assumes that the point of the truth norm is to provide guidance in ascertaining the truth of the propositions being considered for belief.

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<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Reisner (2009) for a recent example.

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