

# Another defence of Owens's exclusivity objection to beliefs having aims

Sullivan-Bissett, Ema; Noordhof, Paul

DOI:

[10.5840/logos-episteme20178110](https://doi.org/10.5840/logos-episteme20178110)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Sullivan-Bissett, E & Noordhof, P 2017, 'Another defence of Owens's exclusivity objection to beliefs having aims', *Logos & Episteme*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 147-153. <https://doi.org/10.5840/logos-episteme20178110>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Eligibility for repository: Checked on 11/1/2017

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# ANOTHER DEFENCE OF OWENS'S EXCLUSIVITY OBJECTION TO BELIEFS HAVING AIMS

Ema SULLIVAN-BISSETT

Paul NOORDHOF

ABSTRACT: David Owens objected to the truth-aim account of belief on the grounds that the putative aim of belief does not meet a necessary condition on aims, namely, that aims can be *weighed* against other aims. If the putative aim of belief cannot be weighed, then belief does not have an aim after all. Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen responded to this objection by appeal to other deliberative contexts in which the aim could be weighed, and we argued that this response to Owens failed for two reasons. Steglich-Petersen has since responded to our defence of Owens's objection. Here we reply to Steglich-Petersen and conclude, once again, that Owens's challenge to the truth-aim approach remains to be answered.

## 1. Common ground

Let us identify the common ground from which we and Steglich-Petersen begin. First, it is a necessary condition on aims that they are weighable.<sup>1</sup> Second, doxastic deliberation (deliberation over *whether to believe that p*) exhibits exclusivity to truth considerations<sup>2</sup> (indeed, Steglich-Petersen<sup>3</sup> has also appealed to the aim of belief in explaining why this is so). The putative aim of belief then is not weighable in the context of doxastic deliberation. On these two points, all parties agree.

---

<sup>1</sup> To our knowledge, of all the responses to Owens's objection, no one has taken issue with this condition on aims.

<sup>2</sup> Conor McHugh has responded to Owens's objection by denying that deliberation over what to believe involves exclusivity to truth considerations, and thus the aim of belief can indeed be weighed, *in that very context* (McHugh, Conor 2013: 'The Illusion of Exclusivity'. *European Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 23, pp. 1117–36). We also think this response to Owens is unsuccessful (see Archer, Sophie 2015: 'Exclusivity Defended'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. doi: 10.1111/phpr.12268; and Sullivan-Bissett, Ema *forthcoming*: 'Aims and Exclusivity'. *European Journal of Philosophy*).

<sup>3</sup> Steglich-Petersen, Asbjørn 2008: 'Does Doxastic Transparency Support Evidentialism?' *Dialectica*, Vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 541–47, p. 546.

## 2. Steglich-Petersen's reply (2009<sup>4</sup>) to Owens (2003<sup>5</sup>)

In reply, Steglich-Petersen identified other deliberative contexts in which the truth-aim can be weighed. He gave examples of the truth-aim being weighable insofar as it can be discarded in the context of deliberation over *whether to form a belief about  $p$*  (that is, whether to enter doxastic deliberation over *whether  $p$* ). Considerations speaking in favour of discarding the truth-aim and not forming a belief about *whether  $p$*  might be ones relating to the cognitive resources one is willing or able to devote to the task, or the consequences which might follow from forming a belief about  $p$ .

## 3. Our response (2013<sup>6</sup>)

In response we made two points. First, in the cases Steglich-Petersen discusses, we should not say that the agents weigh the truth-aim and discard it in favour of other considerations, rather, the truth-aim does not require consideration. This is because agents are not required by the truth-aim to form beliefs, rather, it is only that *if* that is what an agent is up to, *then* the beliefs which she comes to have had better be true ones. This was captured by Owens's formulation of the truth-aim in terms of truth being a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for forming a belief that  $p$ .

Second, Steglich-Petersen equivocates over deliberating over *whether to form a belief about  $p$* , and deliberating over *whether to believe that  $p$* . In the former context, there is no adoption of the truth-aim. If an agent decides not to form a belief about  $p$ , Steglich-Petersen claims that she discards the truth-aim. But this is incorrect. Rather, the decision not to form a belief about  $p$  has been informed by a cognitive process prior to that of belief formation. The agent has not already adopted the truth-aim for  $p$ , and so is not weighing one aim against

---

<sup>4</sup> Steglich-Petersen, Asbjørn 2009: 'Weighing the Aim of Belief'. *Philosophical Studies*. Vol. 145, pp. 395–405.

<sup>5</sup> Owens, David 2003: 'Does Belief Have an Aim?' *Philosophical Studies*. Vol. 115, pp. 283–305.

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan-Bissett, Ema and Noordhof, Paul 2013: 'A Defence of Owens' Exclusivity Objection to Beliefs Having Aims'. *Philosophical Studies*. Vol. 163, pp. 453–7.

another. Truth is only a constraint upon what proposition one believes *if* one is in the business of forming a belief about a subject matter.

#### 4. Steglich-Petersen's counter (2017<sup>7</sup>) and replies

Steglich-Petersen makes three points in reply to our previous defence of Owens's objection. Here, we take each in turn and offer a response, before making a final point.

##### 4.1 If and only if

Owens characterized the truth-aim as one in which the truth of *p* was *necessary* (but not *sufficient*) for belief that *p*. This was so as not to attribute to believers the aim of believing all true propositions. We noted that Steglich-Petersen accepts Owens's characterization of the truth-aim, and eschews the *if and only if* formulation (Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013: p. 454).

In reply, he claims that it is unclear why we took the *if and only if* conception to be eschewed by him (Steglich-Petersen 2017: p. 4). To this we note that if Steglich-Petersen was operating with the *if and only if* conception in his response to Owens, it was dialectically strange to characterize the truth-aim as Owens does, draw on it, and then fail to note that Owens had not characterized it in the right way, and that an alternative conception of the truth-aim would be operated with instead. Putting matters of interpretation aside though, Steglich-Petersen is now clear that he characterizes the truth-aim as one which has truth as *sufficient* for belief that *p*, but as not being vulnerable to the worry raised by Owens. This invulnerability is down to believers having the aim *with respect to particular propositions, or classes of propositions*, and not having a *general aim* of believing all true propositions.

Previously we prefigured a way of responding to us which had structurally similar features to Steglich-Petersen's position without talking of aims for local sets of propositions. We noted that any move to 'if and only if' might be meant not 'as part of an alternative formulation of the truth aim but

---

<sup>7</sup> Steglich-Petersen 2017: 'Weighing the Aim of Belief Again'. *Logos and Episteme*, this issue.

rather a description of what the agent is up to – given that it is now settled for him or her that he or she will arrive at a belief concerning whether or not the proposition is true’ (Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013: p. 454).

This conception of the truth-aim must pave a middle way between believers aiming to believe all the propositions which are true, and believers aiming to have only true beliefs. This middle way is restricted (so as to rule out the best avoided *truth as sufficient* construal), but is more liberal than applying only to those propositions subjected to doxastic deliberation (to rule out the *only if* construal). The thought is that the aim kicks in for those propositions *one considers adopting the truth-aim for*, and then, the truth-aim can be weighed insofar as it can be discarded if the agent decides not to subject the proposition(s) to doxastic deliberation.

This conception of the truth-aim might help Steglich-Petersen’s position only if it is the *same aim* which is present in doxastic deliberation, and the deliberative context which precedes it. (Later we suggest, contra Steglich-Petersen, that it is not, see §4.3, and even if it is, that does not yet do the work, see §4.4).

## 4.2 Conditional aims and weighing

For the sake of argument, Steglich-Petersen grants that the truth-aim is best construed in terms of truth as merely *necessary* for belief. But he says, in cases of so-called *conditional aims* (where one aims to  $\phi$  only if some other condition obtains), it is not the case that other aims and considerations cannot be weighed against the conditional aim. He gives the example of the aim *to go to staff meetings only if there will be cake*, and suggests that pursuing this aim may conflict with one’s other aims (e.g., maintaining good relations with the Department Chair), and these other aims are relevant in deliberation over whether to adopt the cake-aim.

This case is not to the point, since it was no part of our claim that conditional aims cannot be weighed. We were not taking issue with the *structure* of the truth-aim (its being conditional), but with the examples

Steglich-Petersen used to demonstrate contexts in which that aim was *weighed*. We do not deny that there can be consideration of whether to adopt conditional aims; the truth-aim does indeed share with other conditional aims that a context preceding the aim's adoption can involve deliberation over whether to adopt the aim. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the truth-aim and other conditional aims, which, we take it, is the basis of Owens's original concern. With conditional aims, it is possible to adopt the aim, the relevant condition for  $\phi$ -ing *not* be met, and yet  $\phi$  nevertheless. If I adopt the aim to *go to staff meetings only if there is cake*, it is possible for me to decide to go *even though there is not cake* (perhaps the meeting is especially important). Or if I adopt the aim to *run only if it is sunny*, it is possible for me to decide to run, *even if it is not sunny* (perhaps I am training for a marathon) (examples can be multiplied). But the analogous situation is ruled out in the case of the truth-aim: if I take up the truth-aim for some proposition  $p$  and enter into deliberation over *whether to believe that  $p$* , once I answer the question *whether  $p$*  in the negative or even fail to answer it in the positive (and so the condition for belief is not met), I *cannot* form the belief *that  $p$* . There is no parallel possibility of going ahead in spite of the condition not being met in the case of belief.

Steglich-Petersen is aware of this feature of belief formation but maintains it is still appropriate to characterize it as guided by the aim of truth. But given the difference identified, he needs to explain why this difference – not present in other cases – does not threaten the substantial use of aim talk here. We give reasons for supposing it does below (§4.4).

### **4.3 Equivocation**

We argued that deliberating over *whether to form a belief about  $p$*  (to adopt the truth-aim for  $p$ ) is not part of the belief-forming process. That if an agent is deliberating over *whether to be guided by the truth-aim*, she is not yet in the game of forming a belief. Deliberating over whether to adopt the aim with

respect to a particular proposition is not a context in which one is already being guided by that aim.

Steglich-Petersen's claim is that the truth-aim is present in other deliberative contexts, and in some of those (such as whether to adopt that aim), the aim can be weighed. He notes that 'the aim one might take up as a result of deliberating whether to pursue the truth aim with respect to some  $p$ , is the *very aim* that constrains deliberation over whether to believe that  $p'$ ' (Steglich-Petersen 2017: p. 5). So in the context of deliberating over *whether to form a belief about  $p$* , one is working with the aim of belief (alongside others), in a stage prior to the belief-formation process.

We agree that deliberation on the question *whether to form a belief about  $p$*  gives way to practical considerations, and that *if* the truth-aim were present in such deliberation, *then* it would be weighed (perhaps against considerations regarding time or effort). But as we argued previously, deliberation over *whether to adopt the aim of  $\phi$ -ing* takes place in a context prior to  $\phi$ -ing, and so does not (perhaps *cannot*) involve the aim of  $\phi$ -ing itself. That is not to say one cannot adopt the aim of  $\phi$ -ing without actually beginning the process of  $\phi$  ing (aims can be dropped upon further reflection), but only to say that the deliberative context in which one considers *whether to adopt the aim to  $\phi$* , is not one in which *that very aim* plays a role.

Compare deliberating over *whether to adopt the aim of running only if it is sunny outside*. Deliberation over *whether to adopt this aim* will presumably include considerations of time, effort, injury-proneness, and so on. But to say that this deliberative context is one in which the running-aim *itself* plays a role is, it seems to us, implausible, and at the very least, in need of argument.

Here is one way of thinking about the disagreement here. Steglich-Petersen's sufficiency truth-aim can be read as a description of what the agent is up to once it is settled for her which proposition(s) to subject to doxastic deliberation (a point we made previously with respect to the possibility that Steglich-Petersen might opt for an *if and only if* aim (Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof 2013: p. 454)). Suppose that for a set of propositions  $S_1$ , the agent

aims to *believe that p if and only if p is true*. Now we can ask, how is the set itself chosen—that is, how does the agent decide to adopt the truth aim for  $S_1$  instead of  $S_2$ ? Say that  $S_1$  is a set of propositions about what the weather will be like today, and  $S_2$  is a set of propositions about which student broke the classroom window. Presumably what settles one's adopting the sufficiency truth-aim towards one of these sets is a matter of Owens's formulation (if you are to form beliefs about the propositions in  $S_1$  they had better be true), and practical considerations. If it is important to my goals to form a true belief about what the weather will be like today, and/or if it would be troubling to form a true belief about who broke the classroom window, I might decide to believe all and only true propositions in  $S_1$ . But now we see that Steglich-Petersen's truth aim is not *weighed* against anything else, rather what we have is Owens's aim plus practical interests interacting. And this, of course, takes place at a stage prior to Steglich-Petersen's aim playing a role (if it does, see §4.4).

Our original charge was that Steglich-Petersen *equivocated* between deliberating over *whether to form a belief about p* and deliberating over *whether to believe that p*. He responded by noting that there is no such equivocation, that these are indeed different deliberative contexts, but that the truth-aim is at work in both of them (and weighed in the former). We replied here that the truth-aim is not at play in the context of deliberation over whether to adopt that exact aim and towards which proposition(s).

#### **4.4 Weighing simpliciter is not the point**

As a final point, even if the truth aim were being weighed in a context prior to that of doxastic deliberation, that hardly shows that *belief formation* is governed by an aim. Rather, all that would be shown is that there is a truth-aim that can be weighed, and that (perhaps independently) belief formation follows rules that enable beliefs to be true. Just because a certain aim is weighed in deciding whether to deliberate over *p* does not mean that *that aim* is adopted in belief formation. It could just be that the process of belief

formation is such that its outputs are *in accordance with the aim*. When the process of deliberation is going on, the process no longer has the distinctive feature of being guided by the aim (after all, we might take guidance by the aim to be revealed by its being weighed against other aims). Consider the rules of a game. The rules may have been chosen to make the game pleasurable. But when one buys in and follows the rules, one does not allow pleasure to be weighed against other things. Likewise, on what grounds does Steglich-Petersen take bare weighability of the truth-aim in some context to support the claim that *that aim* is what structures the nature of some other context, that of belief formation?

## 5. Conclusions

We have again defended Owens's objection to beliefs having aims, this time from Steglich-Petersen's replies to our previous work on this issue. We agreed with Steglich-Petersen that the adoption of conditional aims can be preceded by deliberation over whether to adopt the aim in question, but argued that—unlike other conditional aims—one cannot go ahead and believe if the condition for believing specified by the aim is not met. One cannot ignore the prescription of the aim of belief. Indeed, it is this which motivated Owens's objection in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

We argued that if the truth aim is to be characterized as having the truth of *p* as sufficient for belief that *p*, *that aim* needs to be present in deliberation over whether to take up the truth aim, for there to be a case of the aim being weighed. But this is not so; deliberation over whether to adopt the aim is prior to deliberation structured by that aim, Steglich-Petersen has mistaken the interaction of the *only if* truth-aim with other interests for the weighing of the *if and only if* truth-aim.

---

<sup>8</sup> For another explanation of why the prescription of the truth aim cannot be ignored, and limits to it, see Noordhof, Paul 2001: 'Believe What You Want'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Vol. 101, pp. 247–65; and Noordhof, Paul 2003: 'Self-Deception, Interpretation and Consciousness'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Vol. LXVII, no. 1, pp. 75–100.

Finally, we claimed that even if Steglich-Petersen were right that the truth aim *is* weighed in a context prior to belief formation, that does not show that belief formation itself is governed by an aim.

Thus we claim, again, that Owens's challenge to the truth-aim approach remains to be answered.