WEIGHING THE AIM OF BELIEF AGAIN

Asbjørn STEGLICH-PETERSEN

ABSTRACT: In his influential discussion of the aim of belief, David Owens argues that any talk of such an 'aim' is at best metaphorical. In order for the 'aim' of belief to be a genuine aim, it must be weighable against other aims in deliberation, but Owens claims that this is impossible. In previous work, I have pointed out that if we look at a broader range of deliberative contexts involving belief, it becomes clear that the putative aim of belief *is* capable of being weighed against other aims. Recently, however, Ema Sullivan-Bissett and Paul Noordhof have objected to this response on the grounds that it employs an undefended conception of the aim of belief not shared by Owens, and that it equivocates between importantly different contexts of doxastic deliberation. In this note, I argue that both of these objections fail.

KEYWORDS: belief, aim, epistemic norms, deliberation, propositional attitudes

1. Weighing the Aim of Belief

Many have been attracted to the idea that belief 'aims' at truth, in the hope of thereby demarcating belief from other propositional attitudes, and of explaining a number of puzzling features of belief, including the standard of correctness and epistemic norms governing belief. However, in his influential discussion of the aim of belief, David Owens argues that any talk of such an 'aim' is at best metaphorical.[1] In order for the 'aim' of belief to be a genuine aim, it must be weighable against other aims in deliberation. But Owens claims that this is impossible: when we deliberative over whether to believe some proposition, only truth-relevant considerations can have a say, to the exclusion of other kinds of considerations. No belief is ever the result of deliberative weighing of the aim of truth with other non-truth relevant aims and considerations. Belief does therefore not 'aim' at truth in a genuine and non-metaphorical sense that can carry its intended explanatory burden.

In my previous discussion of this argument, I pointed out that if we broaden our focus to other deliberative contexts involving belief, it becomes clear that the

---

[1] David Owens, "Does Belief Have an Aim?" *Philosophical Studies* 115 (2003): 283-305.

putative aim of belief *is* capable of the sort of weighing required of genuine aims.[2] In particular, when we deliberative over whether to *take up* the truth-aim with respect to some proposition, it is both relevant and possible to weigh it against other kinds of aims. For example, a teacher might weigh the aim of believing the truth as to which of her pupils broke the window against the aim of avoiding the unpleasant task of having to scold the guilty pupil. Such weighing may very well result in the teacher deciding *not* to pursue the aim of believing the truth with respect to that proposition. We might add that it is also possible for such considerations to enter into deliberation over whether to believe some particular proposition; no belief can result from such weighing, but it can cause the deliberation to be terminated without resulting in a belief. The reason that deliberation over whether to believe some proposition p does not allow weighing in a way that results in a belief as to whether p, I argued, is that such deliberation is essentially constrained by the aim of believing p if and only if p is true. This excludes the relevance of other kinds of considerations, except to convince one to give up the aim and terminate the deliberation. We can thus compare such deliberation to other similarly constrained examples of deliberation, such as deliberation over whether to go to some restaurant as a way of carrying out the aim of going there if and only if it received good reviews.

This explanation assumes, of course, that the aim one might take up as a result of deliberating whether to pursue the truth-aim with respect to some proposition p is the very aim that constrains deliberation over whether to believe that p, and is responsible for the resulting attitude being a belief. But I provided several examples to show that, on reflection, this assumption is quite plausible.[3] This does not entail that all beliefs are related to intentional aims in this way. As I have argued in another context, the aim of belief can be realized both by intentional aims of believers, and by sub-intentional mechanisms that share certain features with intentional aims.[4] Nor does it entail that the aim constraining deliberation over whether to believe that p is always the result of prior deliberation over whether to take up that aim. As with any other aim, it may or may not be the result of a deliberative process.

---

[2] Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, "Weighing the Aim of Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 145 (2009): 395-405.

[3] Steglich-Petersen, "Weighing the Aim," 403-404.

[4] Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, "No Norm Needed: On the Aim of Belief," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 499–516.

2. Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof's Reply

Ema Sullivan-Bissett and Paul Noordhof claim that this response to Owens' argument fails.[5] They advance two points in defense of Owens. Their first point[6] is that the examples I rely on fail because they invoke an undefended conception of the truth-aim not shared by Owens, and, they say, 'officially eschewed' by myself.[7] Owens construes the truth-aim as that of believing *p* only if *p* is true, thus making truth a necessary but not a sufficient condition for adopting belief. His reason for preferring this construal is to avoid implausibly attributing to believers the aim of believing each and every true proposition, however trivial. Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof argue that if this is how we should understand the truth-aim, my examples of the truth-aim being weighed do not work, since in that case, the truth-aim does not insist on the agent forming any beliefs at all, and it therefore doesn't require any consideration whether or not to adopt this aim. For example, since adopting the truth-aim with respect to which of the pupils broke the window leaves the teacher free not to form any belief at all, it does not require any consideration or weighing against other aims on her behalf in deciding whether or not to adopt the aim.

There are several things to say in response to this argument. First of all, it is unclear why Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof claim the if-and-only-if conception of the truth-aim to be 'officially eschewed' by myself. I am quite explicit in the discussion that I operate with this conception,[8] and it plays an integral and obvious role in my theory of doxastic deliberation, both in the article under discussion and elsewhere.[9] My guess is that they take the rejection of this conception as implied by me not objecting explicitly upon presenting Owens' conception, and his reason for preferring this. But nowhere else in the paper do I operate with Owens' conception.

Secondly, although I do not explicitly defend my own conception of the truth-aim in the paper, it should be clear that Owens' reason for preferring his conception is irrelevant on my account. Owens' reason was that we shouldn't

---

[5] Ema Sullivan-Bissett and Paul Noordhof, "A Defence of Owens' Exclusivity Objection to Beliefs Having Aims," *Philosophical Studies* 163 (2013): 453-457.

[6] Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof, "A Defence of Owens," 455.

[7] Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof, "A Defence of Owens," 453.

[8] E.g. on pages 402 and 404 in Steglich-Petersen, "Weighing the Aim."

[9] See e.g. Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, "Voluntarism and Transparent Deliberation," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 25 (2006):171-176; Steglich-Petersen, "No Norm Needed"; and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, "Does Doxastic Transparency Support Evidentialism?" *Dialectica* 62 (2008): 541-547.

attribute to believers the aim of coming to a true belief with respect to all propositions. But this consideration only carries weight if we conceive of the truth-aim as a general aim in the first place. Clearly, believers don't have the aim of coming to a true belief *for any p*. But on my account, when believers have the aim of truth, they have it with respect to particular propositions or classes of propositions, not all propositions. So I do not attribute to believers a general aim of the sort rightly rejected by Owens.

Third, it clearly doesn't undermine my discussion that Owens doesn't share my preferred construal of the truth-aim. What is at issue is whether or not there is an interesting and non-metaphorical sense in which belief aims at truth, and in particular whether this aim satisfies Owens' requirement that it must be weighable against other aims. Owens (and Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof) may have shown that on one particular construal of the truth-aim as a matter of necessary conditions for belief, this aim fails to satisfy Owens' requirement. But I can see no reason why it shouldn't be fair to object that there is *another* interesting construal of the truth aim that *does* satisfy Owens' weighing requirement.

Finally, it is all but clear that Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof's argument holds, even if we accept that the truth-aim should be understood as a mere necessary condition for adopting belief (which I don't). It is certainly not in general the case that conditional aims of doing something *only if* some other condition obtains do not require and allow for weighing with other aims and considerations. Suppose, for example, that I am considering whether to aim for going to staff meetings *only if* there will be cake. Pursuing this aim could easily conflict with other aims of mine, such as the aim of staying on good terms with my Department Chair, and it is certainly relevant to weigh the cake-aim against this other aim in deliberation. It might be objected that such weighing is relevant only if one is interested in going to staff meetings in the first place: if one doesn't have any intention of going to staff meetings anyways, it would be a mute point whether one resolves only to go to meetings with cake. But that also seems too strong. Even if I am undecided on whether to go to staff meetings, it could still require weighing and consideration whether I should aim to go only if there will be cake. These considerations seem to apply to the belief case as well: even if the teacher does not yet have any intention of forming a belief as to which of the pupils broke the window, it could be a relevant matter for weighing and deliberation whether she should aim to adopt some belief on the matter only if the belief is true.

Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof's second point[10] is that deliberating about whether to take up the truth-aim with respect to some proposition p is different from deliberating about whether to believe that p. As they say, Owens' claim about the exclusive relevance of truth was only meant to apply to the latter kind of deliberation, so I am missing the target when pointing out that the truth-aim is weighable in the former kind of deliberation. But I have never claimed that these two kinds of deliberation are the same; in fact, my main observation is that there are *several different* contexts of deliberation in which the truth-aim can play a role, and that it is weighable in at least one of these contexts. As I make explicit, my account assumes 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, thereby explaining the exclusive relevance of truth in this kind of deliberation.[11] This assumption is not beyond question, of course, but Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof do not address it.

3. Conclusion

I conclude that Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof's defense of Owens' exclusivity objection fails. Their first point rests on a misinterpretation of my conception of the truth-aim (and even if their interpretation had been correct, it is not clear that their point would survive). Their second point fails to address the idea that the aim one might take up as a result of deliberating whether to pursue a true belief as to whether p, can constrain deliberation over whether to believe that p.

---

[10] Sullivan-Bissett and Noordhof, "A Defence of Owens," 455-456.
[11] Steglich-Petersen, "Weighing the Aim," 403-404.