Why Interpretation cannot be Naturalised

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Introduction

An important point of disagreement among contemporary neo-pragmatists, in particular Quine on the one hand and Putnam and Brandom on the other, is the role of norms in a correct characterisation of knowledge, thought and language. Indeed, Michael Williams in an insightful article has argued that one of the main issues separating the neo-pragmatists from reductionist naturalists is their belief that meaning is fundamentally normative because intentionality, as Sellars claimed, is always 'fraught with ought'.[1]

In his famous article 'Why Reason cannot be naturalised' Putnam questions the coherence of Quinean naturalism by attacking one of its main prongs, the project of naturalising epistemology. My paper today attempts to continue the Putnamian defence of normativity by looking at Quine's attempt to naturalise meaning. My strategy is not so much to confront Quine directly with the Sellarsian point about the normativity of the intentional, a view that Quine is bound to reject, but to examine Quine's discussions of the resources available to a radical translator and to locate an indispensable role for norms within them.

Section I: Quine's naturalism

Quine's naturalist project has several distinct but interconnected strands.

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[1] Williams, Michael (2006), "Realism: What is Left?", in *Truth and Realism,* Patrick Greenough and Michael P. Lynch (eds.) , Oxford University Press

1. Metaphilosophical Naturalism: Philosophy, Quine tells us, is not an autonomous field of enquiry, rather it is science conducted at a higher level of abstraction.

   (...) my position is a naturalistic one; - he proclaims- "I see philosophy not as an *a priori* propaedeutic or groundwork of science, but as continuous with science. I see philosophy and science as in the same boat – a boat which, to revert to Neurath's figure as I so often do, we can rebuild only at sea while staying afloat in it. There is no external vantage point, no first philosophy."[2]

2. Naturalising epistemology: This is probably the most widely discussed strand of Quine's project and while continuous with metaphilosophical naturalism, it extends the scope of 1 by claiming that epistemology is a branch of psychology. To take one representative passage, Quine says:

   Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a human phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. [3]

   The point is not to abandon or repudiate epistemology but to show that, once properly understood, it could be assimilated into empirical psychology and ultimately neuroscience. Epistemological questions continue to hold their legitimacy but are treated as questions within science, rather than prior to it.[4] Such naturalism presupposes both a physicalist ontology and extensional logic.

   3. The most significant and controversial strand in Quine's project is the attempt to naturalise language. Linguistic naturalism is significant because it is founded on Quine's momentous rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction and is controversial because it leads to the highly counter-intuitive doctrines of indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference. Its two main features are the rejection of the very idea of meaning and a commitment to behaviourist view of language acquisition. Indeed, it is sometimes forgotten that Quine's behaviourism did not so much concern the

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[2] Quine, 1969, pp. 126–27
[3] Quine, 1968, p. 82.
[4] Quine, 1993, *Synthese* 94: 335-356

methodology of psychology but was presented as a pre-requisite of linguistics. In *Pursuit of Truth* Quine is explicit on this point

> In psychology one may or may not be a behaviourist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others.[5]

Quine's naturalisation of language, of course, begins with the denial of analyticity. To remind ourselves, if any reminders are needed, in the 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' Quine's strategy was to show that none of the attempts to characterise the analytic/synthetic distinction, including Kant's but most notably Carnap's, manage to give a noncircular or non-question begging account of the distinction. He concludes that the belief 'That there is such a distinction to be drawn at all is an unempirical dogma of empiricists, a metaphysical article of faith'[6]. Quine's dismantling of the traditional view of analyticity inexorably leads to the denial of the possibility of a theory of meaning, at least as traditionally understood. In its place, he offers an account of language compatible with behaviourist naturalism. 'There is nothing in linguistic meaning", he tells us, "…. beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances'.[7] 'Empirical meaning' is defined as that which a sentence has in common with its translation, and manuals of translation are established based on how we correlate linguistic items with non-verbal stimulations.[8] The upshot of all of this is that meaning is explicated via manuals of translation constructed by observing the stimulus-responses of speakers engaged in verbal behaviour in specific settings. 'We can take the behavior, the use, and let the meanings go'.[9] The price attached to this pared down empirical approach to language is quite high, for we notoriously have to accept that 'Manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of dispositions, yet incompatible with one another'.[10]

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[5] Quine, 1982, *Pursuit of Truth,* Cambridge: Harvard, revised edition, pp. 37-38.
[6] Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' 1953: 37.
[7] Quine 1987: 5.
[8] Quine 1960: 32.
[9] Quine 1979: 1.
[10] Quine 1960, p. 27

Quine's approach is not about mere translation, but applies to attempts at interpreting a 'home' language as well. Language is irredeemably indeterminate and the indeterminacy permeates down to singular putatively referential terms. Neither meaning nor reference can be pinned down. All we are left with is with language as

> [A] social art which we all acquire on the evidence of other people's overt behavior under publicly recognizable circumstances. Meanings, therefore, those very models of mental entities, end up as grist for the behaviorist's mill. (1969: 26-7).

Section II. Quine and the Normative

Quine's naturalist project, and not just his linguistic naturalism, has faced wide-spread criticism from philosophers who believe that norms are ineluctable components of not just meaning but also knowing and understanding. Jaegwon Kim, for instance, has argued that knowledge itself is a normative concept, for if we accept the standard definition of knowledge as justified true belief and acknowledge the intrinsic normativity of justification, then naturalised epistemology would, in effect, amount to the proposal to eliminate knowledge itself from the theory of knowledge.[11]

Quine, has conceded the point by allowing that the naturalisation of epistemology does not "jettison the normative" or settle simply "for the indiscriminate description of ongoing processes". However, "normative epistemology " should be seen as "a branch of engineering or the technology of truth-seeking. Unlike in ethics, there is no question here of ultimate value, but the norms are tools for achieving greater efficacy in attaining truth or prediction".[12] Norms such as simplicity, fecundity, "conservatism, or the maxim of minimum mutilation" are integral to epistemology but only in an instrumental

[11] Kim, J. , 1988, 'What is "Naturalized Epistemology"?' *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 edited by James E. Tomberlin, Asascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co: 381-406.
[12] Quine, 1986, p. 664 -666). He says: "For me normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking, or, in a more cautiously epistemological term, prediction. Like any technology, it makes free use of whatever scientific findings may suit its purpose. It draws upon mathematics .. . in scouting the gambler's fallacy. It draws on experimental psychology in exposing perceptual illusions... . There is no question here of ultimate value, as in morals; it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here, as elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter is expressed". (H&S, p. 665)

sense[13]. They help us to achieve our epistemic goals, the goal of increasing our stock of knowledge, but their force is hypothetical rather than categorical. Epistemic norms are a part of the 'technology of truth seeking'[14] but both truth and knowledge are still to be understood naturalistically - it's only the mechanisms for their discovery that may be value-laden.

Section III: But what of normativity about language?

Since Kripke's Wittgenstein, the view that meaning and language have an essentially normative character has become commonplace.[15] To say that meaning is essentially *normative* is to claim that it is impossible to use language meaningfully without reliance on certain norms. Norms of meaning, in this sense, are constitutive of language and not instrumental. But Quine, to remind ourselves, believes that

> The Sort of meaning that is basic to translation, and to the learning of one's language, is empirical meaning and nothing more. A child learns his first words and sentences by hearing them in the presence of appropriate stimulus. These must be external stimuli, for they must act both on the child and on the speaker from whom he is learning. Language is socially inculcated and that inculcations and the control turn strictly on the keying of sentences to shared stimulation.[16]

Unsurprisingly, this austere naturalist view of language does not seem to leave room for norms as presuppositions or essential features of language. Could Quine provide an adequate view of language while eschewing the idea of norms as integral to language?

The idea that norms are essential to language has been cashed out in different ways, but essential to all its expressions is the claim that the use of language always entails a distinction between correct and incorrect application. Paul Boghossian, for instance

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[13] WP, p. 247, FSS p. 49
[14] Quine 1986 p., 665
[15] The view is expressed most strongly by Laurence and Howthorne, *The Grammar of Meaning*, who argue that the very act of translation presupposes a normative framework for "to translate is to put forward a normative injunction—to propose a rule designed to govern cross cultural communication" (p. 12).
[16] Quine 1969, p. 81

argues that meaningful expressions have correctness conditions. "Suppose the expression 'green' means *green.* It follows immediately that the expression 'green' applies *correctly* only to these things (the green ones) and not to those (the non-greens)….The normativity of meaning turns out to be, in other words, simply a new name for the familiar fact that…meaningful expressions possess conditions of *correct use.*"[17]

But as Boghossian has come to admit[18], it is not easy to spell out the conditions for correct use of language. Two possibilities come to mind: Firstly, it might be argued that correct usage in language is inseparable from talk of truth- for, to use an assertoric sentence under 'correct conditions' is to make a true assertion. But even if we grant this line of argument, the connection between normativity and truth remains obscure. It is often argued that truth is a norm of assertion or belief. But to argue for this point, as I have done elsewhere[19], does not show that truth itself, in any intuitive sense, is normative. At best, what has been achieved is a hypothetical imperative to the effect that if you do not wish to mislead your interlocutors or if you want to be genuinely informative, then you ought to aim at truth. Quine would be more than happy to admit to this hypothetical demand for normativity as part of his technology of truth-seeking.

A second way of understanding the norms governing the 'correct use' of language is via a theory of reference. To use a term correctly, according to this view, is to get its reference right. But this approach would not work in Quine's case either. Reference for Quine, to remind ourselves, is indeterminate and opaque. So the argument that there are normative pre-requisites for correct reference is simply not going to wash with him.

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[17] Boghossian 1989, Boghossian, Paul A. (1989). "The Rule-Following Considerations". Mind 98:507-549. 513

18 Boghossian, P, 2005, "Is Meaning Normative?" in Christian Nimtz and Ansgar Beckermann (eds.): Philosophy—Science—Scientific Philosophy. Main Lectures and Colloquia of GAP.5, Fifth International Congress of the Society for Analytical Philosophy, Bielefeld, 2003, Mentis, 2005.

[19] M. Baghramian and R. Hamilton, "Relativism and the Norm of Truth", *Trópos*, Rivista di ermeneutica e critica filosofica diretta da Gianni Vattimo e Gaetano Chiurazzi, "Relativismo e Verità", a cura di Piero Cresto–Dina, Anno III (2010), n. 1, Aracne editrice, Roma.

It may seem that there is another, rather easy and obvious, way of showing the normative commitments of Quine's approach to language. The radical translator, in Quine's famous thought experiment, attempts to translate a hitherto unknown language into English by correlating linguistic utterances of the native with observations. Quine readily admits that even in this austere linguistic landscape, the field linguist needs to incorporate certain principles and presuppositions into his manual of translation, the most significant of which is the Principle of Charity. Here is Quine's statement of the Principle

> The maxim of translation underlying all this is that assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language. This maxim is strong enough in all of us to swerve us even from the homophonic method that is so fundamental to the very acquisition and use of one's mother tongue. The common sense behind the maxim is that one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence[20].

And again,
> ….. the more absurd or exotic the beliefs imputed to a people, the more suspicious we are entitled to be of the translations; the myth of the prelogical people marks only the extreme. For translation theory, banal messages are the breath of life.[21]

It would be tempting to argue that the Principle of Charity shows the indispensability of norms in all attempts at translation and interpretation. The argument is that the translator, by applying this Principle, is trying to make sense of the native's utterances, and *pace* Michael Williams[22], making sense is a fundamentally normative notion. But the route to norming Quine is not so simple. Two objections to this line of thought present themselves:

Firstly, for Quine, unlike Davidson, the norms of translation assumed by the field linguist are heuristic devices or prudential constraints on the task of radical translation, rather

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[20] Quine, 1960, p. 20, 57, 59 and 60
[21] ibid., p. 68
[22] William, M, 2006, p. 99

than indispensable presuppositions of the very act of interpretation. Even the principle of non-contradiction is a defeasible assumption rather than a pre-requisite of all ascriptions of language. There could be circumstances, Quine is willing to allow, when all things considered, the field linguist should be willing to attribute seemingly irrational beliefs to her interlocutors. He explains

> The linguist will rely also on observation of the local folkways. The child does too, but the linguist is a more seasoned observer. Unlike the child, the linguist will not accept everything the native says as true. He will indeed assume sincerity, barring evidence to the contrary, but he will try as an amateur psychologist to fit his interpretations of the native sentences to the native's likely belief rather than to the facts of circumambient nature. Usually the outcome will be the same, since people are so much alike; but his observation of the folkways is his faltering guide to the divergences. [23]

Secondly, and even more importantly, Quine in his later writing has grounded the Principle of Charity on empirical considerations. For instance, in the 1970, "Progress in Theory of Language", he urges that those interpreted should be construed as expressing "plausible messages", and proceeds to make this an empirical matter based on frequency measurements and statistical considerations.[24]

Both these points could be challenged, but such a step would require an in-depth engagement with a substantial body of Quine's work. So, we could safely say that the **easy** route from Charity to normativity is not open to Quine's critics. Yet, I think the spectre of normativity, of the sort that would not sit readily with Quine's naturalism, still haunts this arid linguistic landscape. Or, this is what I will argue in the last section of this paper.

Section IV. Empathy as a pre-requisite of language

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[23] Quine 1995: 80.
[24] Quine, 1970, "Philosophical Progress in Theory of Language", *Metaphilosophy*, VL 1, IS 1.

From the very outset of developing the project of linguistic naturalism, it has been obvious to Quine, and not just to his critics, that there was more to learning, interpreting, and translating a language than the simple mapping of basic observation sentences to stimuli. One nagging question is how we could know or establish that speakers and learners are acting on the same stimulus. Quine provides two interconnected responses to this puzzle.

In the 1980s, Quine began to emphasise that a sense of similarity is fundamental to our thought and language. Without shared similarity, he argued, learning in general and language learning in particular would not be possible — nor would induction and prediction. According to him

> People have to be in substantial agreement, however unconscious, as to what counts as similar if they are to succeed in learning, one person from another, when next to assent to a given observation sentence.[25]

But Quine had to admit that similarity in responses is not enough to get process of translation and learning off the ground, for there are indefinitely many patterns of similarities and differences between stimuli. So, in addition to a shared sense of similarity, an interpreter needs to become attuned to what other speakers consider similar on a given occasion. This is where Quine appeals to a shared capability that ensures the intersubjectivity. He calls this ability "empathy" and explains

> Empathy dominates the learning of language, both by child and by field linguist. In the child's case it is the parent's empathy. The parent assesses the appropriateness of the child's observation sentence by noting the child's orientation and how the scene would look from there. In the field linguist's case it is empathy on his own part when he makes his first conjecture about 'Gavagai' on the strength of the native's utterance and orientation, and again when he queries 'Gavagai' for the native's assent in a promising subsequent situation. We all have an uncanny knack for empathizing another's perceptual situation, however ignorant of the physiological or optical mechanism of his perception.[26]

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[25] Quine, 1984, the emphasis on the idea of shared similarity was there in Quine's very last publication, the paper he gave at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston.

[26] Quine, 1990, p. 42

But reliance on empathy goes beyond the mere perceptual level. For according to Quine, "Empathy guides the linguist …. as he rises above observation sentences through his analytical hypotheses ….. though there he is trying to project into the native's associations and grammatical trends rather than his perceptions. And much the same must be true of the growing child"[27]

Quine treats these additional presuppositions of radical translation, the shared sense of similarity and innate feelings of empathy, as "instinctive" features of human psychology[28]. The knack of empathy, he thinks, is somewhat similar to our ability to recognize faces while unable to sketch or describe them. Evolution has inculcated them in us, for without them language and learning from each other would not have been possible. In the longer version of this paper, I argue that a non-normative account of both empathy and sense of similarity are hard to come by. Here, I will concentrate only on the role of empathy in translation and interpretation and its normative features.

Quine's reliance on empathy as a pre-requisite of translation has raised serious questions regarding his continued commitment to behaviourism, or at least the extent of it. George Alexander, for instance, has argued that the introduction of empathy undermines Quine's behaviourism.[29] Eva Picardi, on the other hand, argues that there is an ambiguity in Quine's writing between a naturalist Darwinian interpretation of empathy vs. a normative Dylthian one and Quine helps himself to both. Both authors, I think, have come close to diagnosing the problem that the introduction of the notion of empathy poses for Quine's naturalism, but they do not correctly locate the connection between norms and empathy in Quine's writing.

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[27] ibid. 43

[28] Quine's point about empathy was foreshadowed in his "The Problem of Meaning in Linguistics " (Quine 1953) where Quine had explained:
    as the sentences undergoing translation get further and further from mere reports of common observations, the clarity of any possible conflict decreases; the lexicographer comes to depend increasingly on a projection of himself, with his Indo-European Weltanschauung, into the sandals of his Kalaba informant. He comes also to turn increasingly to that last refuge of all scientists, the appeal to internal simplicity of his growing system" (Quine 1953: 63).

[29] George, Alexander. 2000. "Quine and Observation". In Orenstein and Kotatko (eds.) Knowledge, *Language and Logic: Questions for Quine*, 21–47. Dordrecht: Kluwer

There has been much discussion of empathy in recent years, resulting in a better understanding of its different varieties. In the context of this paper, of particular interest is the distinction between low level and more complex experiences of empathy.[30]

The mirroring route to empathy: The discovery of mirror neurons[31] has given support to the view that a certain 'mental 'mimicry' or mirroring is experienced by humans, as well as some animals, usually at a subconscious level. The emotion of disgust is one well-studied case. Evidence from fMRI studies shows that observing a face expressing disgust produces mental mimicry, or empathy in the observer.[32] Quine's claims that "the "perception of another's unspoken thought" by means of instinctive empathy is "older than language" and that "an infant of just a few days old responds to an adult's facial expression, even to imitating it by the unlearned flexing of appropriate muscles" are in line with the these more recent findings in neuroscience regarding empathy.[33]

Empathy in this sense of mimicry is not normative in any interesting sense. It is in Quine's words instinctive or innate and operates at a pre-conceptual level. Both Alexaner George and Eva Picardi fail to acknowledge this point.

Reconstructive Empathy: The second variety of empathy, and the route to it, are more complex. Goldberg calls this type of empathy "reconstructive", it is also known as "perspective taking" or "re-enactive[34] empathy". Contrary to automatic mirroring, reconstructive empathy is a conscious, reflective process, akin to feeling attuned with the mental states of others. Its function, among other things, is the ascriptions of mental states[35] - or mind-reading - rather than the sharing of similar perceptual contents. The biological sources of this type of empathy are notwell-known, but they certainly go

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[30] See for instance, Alvin Goldman (2011), "Two Routes to Empathy – Insights from Cognitive Neuroscience" in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives,* Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (eds.), Oxford University Press. I have benefited greatly from discussions and correspondence on the topic of empathy with Meline Papazian.

[31] Iacoboni, Marco, 2009, 'Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons'Annual Review of Psychology, Vol. 60, January: 653 -670

[32] Wicker et al 2003

[33] Quine 1995 From Stimulus To Science, p. 89

[34] Karsten Stuber calls these two types of empathy 'basic' and 're-enactive' (2006)

[35] The debates have been conducted largely independently of Quine who clearly was a pioneer in the field. In fact one author exhorts Quine to adopt empathy as part of his analytic hypothesis of radical translation, never mentioning all the passages where Quine does exactly that. .

beyond the rather primitive mirror neurons and involve the higher functions of the brain. It is this type of empathy, I argue, that essentially involves and relies on normative elements.

Quine expresses the idea behind what I, following Goldman, have called 'reconstructive empathy' in two distinct, but inter-related ways:

A. Practical psychology, he claims, "is what sustains our radical translator all along the way, and the method of his psychology is empathy: he imagines himself in the native's situation as best he can".[36]
B. The field linguist "observes the native, hears what the native says, and sees the situation. He empathizes, puts himself in the native's place"[37].

Eva Picardi locates the ambiguity in Quine's account of empathy because of his failure to distinguish between these two cases, or as she puts it, in the difference between instances where the empathetic translator tries to figure out what the linguist would do if he were in the native's shoe and where he tries to find out what he would do if he were the native. The first reading, Picardi argues, is normative while the second, by appealing to imagination, moves far from behaviourism as classically understood. [38]

Although the two ways of empathizing are distinct and Quine should have been careful not to run them together, Picardi, I believe misdiagnoses the ambiguity in Quine's account. Both types of empathy outlined above are variants of reconstructive empathy; they are different mechanisms for ascribing mental states and propositional attitudes to targets of interpretation and translation and both have inescapable normative elements. Indeed empathising, at this more complex level, is a normative act. Quine's failure is not to distinguish clearly between the low level and high level empathy, that is between mimicry and re-enactment. To see this, let's look at a hypothetical situation of radical translation. The translator, as Quine outlines the thought experiment, engages in psychological conjectures as to what the native is likely to believe.

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[36] Quine, 1990/92 p. 46
[37] https://sites.google.com/site/diogenesphil/quine-tomida. Interview of Quine by Yushiko Tomida
[38] Eva Picardi "Empathy and Charity" p. 132 in Decock, L., & Horsten, L. (2000). *Quine: naturalized epistemology, perceptual knowledge and ontology.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.

The linguist will also rely also on observations of the "local folkways". "[He] will not accept everything the native says as true. He will indeed assume sincerity, barring evidence to the contrary, but he will try as an amateur psychologist to fit his interpretations of the native sentences to the native's likely belief rather than to the facts of circumambient nature. Usually the outcome will be the same, since people are so much alike; but his observation of the folkways is his faltering guide to the divergences". [39]

The translator then is relying on value judgements - judgements about what the native ought to believe either based on judgements of reasonableness by the field linguists' light or what would be the appropriate belief to have in the context of the natives' way of life. Both these approaches are imbued with norms for they are judgements about what, all things being equal, the native ought to believe. Quine, indeed, seems to be willing to admit to the presence of norms in such contexts of empathic interpretation for he goes on to say: "But [the translator] will not ***cultivate these values*** at the cost of unduly complicating the structure to be ascribed to the native's grammar and semantics, for this again would be bad psychology; the language must have been simple enough for acquisition by the natives, whose minds, failing evidence to the contrary, are presumed to be pretty much like our own".[40] (Emphasis added)

The normative elements of empathic translation, unlike the epistemic norms discussed in section 2, are not hypothetical but constitutive of the act of mind-reading. Quine's epistemic norms, simplicity, and fecundity, and the rest are instrumental values. They are a part of the 'technology of truth seeking' [41] Not so with the norms applicable to empathy, because empathy in Quine's account is a pre-condition of all successful interpretation.

Higher-level empathy is normative in a second sense, in that we attach a value to acts of empathy. To use Quine's own terminology, empathy, unlike the epistemic norms and even truth, has an ultimate value. We praise or blame people for the degree of empathy they are willing or capable of showing, we consider it wrong or even reprehensible

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[39] Quine 1995: 80
[40] Quine, 1990, p. 46
[41] Quine 1986 p. 665.

when people fail to put themselves in 'someone else's shoe' and, in extreme cases, we even look for medical explanations for any marked absence of empathy. For these reasons, as claimed above, empathy should be seen as an essentially normative act. It might be objected that the evaluative connotations of empathy were not what Quine had in mind in his discussion of the psychological pre-requisite of interpretation. But to fail to notice the ethical import of empathy and its relevance to what Quine has called the 'lot of ethics' is to do violence to usage of the term, not just in ordinary language but also in psychology.

If the above is correct, then Quine ultimately is relying on an essentially normative concept in order to explain our ability to translate/interpret each other and therefore the project of linguistic naturalism ultimately fails. Quine might object that even the so-called 'high level empathy', like its low level counter-part, will be shown to have neurological underpinnings. I have no doubt that this is correct; nothing performed by the human mind is free of a neurological underpinnings. But conceding this point does not affect the normative force of empathy, just as finding neurological underpinnings for our dispositions to behave morally would not render ethics non-normative.

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