Quine, Naturalised Meaning and Empathy

Maria Baghramian

School of Philosophy
University College Dublin

Abstract

Naturalism is the defining feature of the philosophy of Willard van Orman Quine. But there is little clarity in our understanding of naturalism and the role it plays in Quine's work. The current paper explores one strand of Quine's naturalist project, the strand that primarily deals with a naturalised account of language. I examine the role that Quine assigns to empathy as the starting point of the process of learning and translating a language and argue that empathy, when going beyond the automatic form of mirroring, has an irreducible normative character which does not sit well with Quinean naturalism.

Keywords: Quine, Naturalism, Radical Translation, Empathy

1. Quine's naturalism

Naturalism, a dominant strand in current philosophical thinking in the analytic tradition, is the defining feature of the work of Willard van Oman Quine. However, despite its centrality, or maybe because of it, there is no clarity or consensus in our understanding of naturalism nor of the exact role it plays in Quine's work. The current paper explores one strand of Quine's naturalist project, the strand that primary deals with a naturalised account of language.

We can find several interconnected articulations of Quinean naturalism. Metaphilosophical or methodological Naturalism: Philosophy, according to Quine, should not be seen as an autonomous field of enquiry, rather as science conducted at a higher level of abstraction. Here is one famous quote:

> [...] my position is a naturalistic one; I see philosophy not as an *a priori* propaedeutic or groundwork for 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 (Quine1969b: 126-27).

A second defining feature of Quine's methodological naturalism is that he sees the natural sciences as providing the most reliable methodology for any investigation. This approach "sees natural science as an inquiry into reality, fallible

and corrigible but not answerable to any supra-scientific tribunal, and not in need of any justification beyond observation and the hypothetico-deductive method" (Quine 1981b: 72).

Naturalising epistemology: This is probably the most widely discussed strand of Quine's project and while continuous with metaphilosophical naturalism, it further extends its scope by proposing that epistemology should be treated as 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" (Quine 1969a: 82). And again, "Naturalism does not repudiate epistemology, but assimilates it to empirical psychology" (Quine 1981a: 75).

Quine's aim, then, is not to abandon epistemology but to assimilate it into the empirical science of psychology and ultimately into neuroscience. Epistemological questions, on this account, do continue to hold their legitimacy but are treated as questions within science, rather than prior to it.

Naturalised Meaning: The most radical 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 it is controversial because it leads to the highly counter-intuitive doctrines of indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference. Its two defining features are the rejection of the very idea of meaning and a commitment to a behaviourist view of language acquisition. Indeed, it is sometimes forgotten that Quine's behaviourism did not so much concern the methodology of psychology but was presented as a pre-requisite of linguistics. In *Pursuit of Truth* he is explicit on this point:

> I hold […] that the behaviorist approach is mandatory. In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, 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. We depend strictly on overt behavior in observable situations. As long as our command of our language fits all external checkpoints, where our utterance or our reaction to someone's utterance can be appraised in the light of some shared situation, so long all is well. Our mental life between checkpoints is indifferent to our rating as a master of the language. There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances (Quine 1990a: 37-38).

Meaning too is to be understood in term of observable behaviour and dispositions to behaviour. He tells us:

> […] there are no meanings, nor likenesses nor distinctions of meaning, beyond what are implicit in people's dispositions to overt behavior. For naturalism the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer, known or unknown, except in so far as the answer is settled in principle by people's speech dispositions, known or unknown. If by these standards there are indeterminate cases, so much the worse for the terminology of meaning and likeness of meaning (Quine 1969a: 29).

Quine's naturalisation of language, of course, begins with the denial of analyticity. To remind ourselves, if any reminders were needed, Quine's strategy, in the "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine 1951) was to show that none of the

attempts to characterise the analytic/synthetic distinction, including Kant's, but most notably Carnap's, succeed in providing a noncircular or non-question begging account of this well entrenched 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" (Quine 1951: 37). Quine's rejection of analyticity is of a piece with his scepticism about the very possibility of a theory of meaning, as traditionally understood. In its place, he offers an account of language compatible with behaviourist naturalism. Behaviourism is the preferred route because of its scientific credentials. Meaning, in so far as we can allow it into our scientific discourse, is what a sentence has in common with its translation; and translation is understood in terms of establishing correlations between utterances and non-verbal stimulations (see Quine 1960: 32).

The upshot 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" (Quine 1979: 1). 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 speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another" (Quine 1960: 27).

Quine's approach is not about translation from other languages only but it also applies to attempts at interpreting a 'home' language. Since, the behavioural model applies equally to children learning their first language, it turns out that language is irredeemably indeterminate and the indeterminacy permeates down to the putatively referential singular terms. Neither meaning nor reference can be pinned down and we are thus left with language as

> a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely 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 (Quine 1969a: 26).

2. Norming Quine

Quine's naturalist project, and not just his linguistic naturalism, has been criticised for leaving out the normative elements of meaning, knowing and understanding. The worry is that the descriptive language of science is not sufficient for dealing with domains that rely for their proper functioning on normative concepts as well as normative judgements of what is correct, appropriate or desirable. Jaegwon Kim, for instance, has argued that epistemology cannot be fully naturalised because knowledge itself is a normative concept. If we accept the standard definition of knowledge as justified true belief and the intrinsic normativity of justification, then naturalised epistemology would, in effect, amount to the proposal to eliminate knowledge itself from the theory of knowledge (cf. Kim 1988). Similar points apply to the essential normativity of language. Paul Boghossian, for instance, argues that meaningful expressions have correctness conditions and are in that sense essentially normative. "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 norma-

tivity 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" (Boghossian 1989: 513).

Quine, however, does allow for norms within his naturalist approach and tells us that naturalism does not require that we "jettison the normative" completely nor that we should settle simply "for the indiscriminate description of ongoing procedures" (Quine 1986: 664). He goes on to explain the role of norms in his account of knowledge:

> 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 upon 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 (Quine 1986: 664-65).

Quine also considers norms such as simplicity, fecundity, 'conservatism, or 'the maxim of minimum mutilation'' integral to epistemology but argues that they should be seen as playing an instrumental, rather than a foundational, constitutive or a priori role (cf. Quine 1976: 247, 1995: 49). Such norms are tools for achieving our epistemic goals, in particular the goal of increasing our stock of knowledge; their force however is hypothetical rather than categorical. And although epistemic norms are a part of the "technology of truth seeking" (Quine 1986: 665), both truth and knowledge are still to be understood naturalistically—it is only the mechanisms for their discovery that may be norm-laden not the results of such discoveries.

But what about the normative features of language? Do they play any role in Quine's account of language? The suggestion that language has an essential normative element is not devoid of controversy. Boghossian himself, for instance, has conceded (Boghossian 2005) that it is not easy to spell out the conditions for the correct use of language. It is not clear where exactly are we to locate the normative dimension of language and how we are to cash out the idea of 'correct conditions of use' and yet there is a general consensus that to learn a language involves knowledge of what counts as the right conditions for the use of its various elements.

In looking at the normative dimensions of both learning and interpreting/translating a language we might reasonably argue that the correct usage of a great deal of language is inseparable from the conditions of the truth and falsity of assertoric sentences; to use an assertoric sentence under 'correct conditions' is to make a true assertion, so the normative force of being correct is inseparable from truth. But even if we grant this line of argument, the connection between normativity and truth is far from obvious. Notwithstanding Timothy Williamson's 'knowledge first' project (Williamson 1996, 2007), the claim that truth is a norm of assertion is cashed out in a variety of ways. One standard way of arguing for the point is to claim that to assert a proposition P is to commit to the truth of p, a related way of expressing the point is to argue that by asserting a proposition P we are aiming, maybe not always successfully, to say something true. But, the claim that truth is the goal or the commitment of assertions does not show that

truth itself, in any intuitive sense, is normative (cf. Baghramian and Hamilton 2010). Quine rightly can argue that, at best, what this line of argument delivers 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'. As we saw, Quine is willing to allow that norms play a crucial role in epistemology, but only in an instrumental sense. There is, therefore, little reason to think that he would not be willing to assign a similar role to the norm of truth in the linguistic domain. This is evident in Quine's evolutionary account of human cognition, where he famously argues that "Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind" (Quine 1969b: 126) because such creatures do not manage to accumulate and communicate a sufficiently large stock of true beliefs that is essential for their survival. Our survival as a species depends on having beliefs that are, for the most part, true. But the usefulness of truth does not show that sentences have to comply with the norm of truthfulness in order to be meaningful. False sentences are as meaningful as true ones and also have correct conditions of application, for instance under conditions when we intend to mislead our interlocutors.

A second and possibly more promising way of assigning a central role to norms in Quine's account of language is via his theory of radical translation. The radical translator, in Quine's famous thought experiment, attempts to translate a hitherto unknown language into his home language by correlating linguistic utterances of the natives with their behaviour and features of the environment. Quine's line of thought is well known, so a very brief reminder should suffice. Radical translation sets out the conditions for translating the language of a hitherto unknown people without help from dictionaries or bilinguals. The only data that the radical translator has at his disposal are the observable behaviour of the speakers of this unknown language and the forces that he can see impinging on the native's surfaces (cf. Quine 1960: 32-33). According to Quine, 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 and using 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 controlled; the inculcation and control turn strictly on the keying of sentences to shared stimulation (Quine 1969a: 81). Unsurprisingly, this austere naturalist view of language learning does not leave much room for norms as either the presuppositions or the essential features of language. The question facing us now, is whether Quine could provide an adequate view of understanding and communication through language while by-passing the idea that norms are integral to the conditions for successful uses of language.

Quine acknowledges that even within his proposed austere linguistic landscape, the field linguist will incorporate certain normative principles 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 (Quine 1960: 54).

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 (Quine 1960: 63).

It would be tempting to argue that the Principle of Charity shows the indispensability of norms, or at least some norms, to all translations. Lance and Hawthorne (1997: 12), for instance, have argued that translation is necessarily normative. Their point will apply equally to Quine's method of radical translation. It is the translator's task to make sense of other speakers and, *pace* Michael Williams (Williams 2006: 99), making sense is a fundamentally normative activity. Hence the temptation to claim that the Principle of Charity, the starting point of the process of translation, carries the normative burden that we are assigning to language learning and understanding, a burden that Quine wished to avoid. But the route to 'norming' Quine is not so simple. Two objections to this line of thought present themselves.

Firstly, the norms of translation assumed by the field linguist, according to Quine, but not to Davidson, are instrumental. They are heuristic devices or prudential constraints, rather than indispensable presuppositions of the very act of interpretation. In this, they parallel the epistemic norms allowed by Quine and discussed above. For Quine, at his most radical best, even the laws of logic are defeasible assumptions and open to revision.

Secondly, and even more importantly, Quine at all times, is seeking to ground the Principle of Charity in empirical considerations. For instance, in "Philosophical Progress in Language Theory", where he also argues strongly for the literal continuity between the natural sciences and philosophy by saying that "Philosophy, or what appeals to me under that head, is an aspect of science" (Quine 1970: 2), he urges that the targets of our translation should be construed as expressing 'plausible messages', and proceeds to give an empirical account of such messages, based on frequency measurements and statistical considerations. So, Quine's naturalistic view of language is not undermined by the normative requirements of the assertoric uses of language nor by the requirements of radical translation. Yet, I think the spectre of normativity, of the sort that would not sit readily with Quine's naturalism, still haunts his arid linguistic landscape. In the remainder of this paper, I try to make a case for this very point.

3. Quine on Empathy

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 facing Quine, as well as his commentators, was how is it possible to know or to establish that speakers and learners are acting on the same stimulus. Davidson in a number of places had tried to

persuade Quine that sameness of meaning can be achieved by accepting the role of distal stimuli, shared by speakers (cf. Davidson 1990). Quine, on the other hand, continued to insist that within a naturalist account of translation, the only class of stimulus suitable for a scientific treatment is the stimulation of nerve endings through the individual speaker's encounters with the world, or what Davidson calls 'proximal stimuli' (*ibid.*). Quine, therefore, continued to locate stimulus meaning at the level of the neural input, rather than the external objects of reference. However, he did acknowledge the force of the criticism that an internal psychological account of individual speakers' patterns of assent and dissent to stimuli does not, by itself, explain how speakers could be assumed to have shared sets of stimuli and thereby a shared language. His solution, in the 1980s, was to postulate an innate shared sense of similarity between speakers as the guarantor of sameness of stimulus in the first instance of observation sentences in the next stages of translation. He argued:

> 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. […] Subjects radically at odds in this neural way could never learn observation sentences or anything else from one another. Our training even of a dog, horse, bear, seal, or elephant hinges on a conformity of his inarticulate similarity standards to our own (Quine 1984: 294).

However, very soon Quine had to admit that similarity in patterns of stimulus and response does not guarantee the sameness of stimulus meaning, because, for one thing, there are indefinitely many patterns of similarities and differences between any object and state and we need first to determine the respect in which they are similar or dissimilar. What patterns of similarity and differences we pick up at any occasion would depend on contextual considerations and our interests, so what counts as similar is not exhaustively determined by our shared neuronal makeup but also by the contexts that make such judgements relevant or appropriate. Since judgments of similarity, as Quine admits, are substantially interest-relative, 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 begins to appeal to a shared capability that would make meaning intersubjectively available. He comes to explain this capability in terms of a shared experience of empathy or the ability, perceptually and epistemically, to put oneself in other person's shoes.

The term 'empathy' first occurs in Quine's *Pursuit of Truth* (1990a, Chs. III and IV) and later in his *From Stimulus to Science* (1995, Ch. VIII). But the basic idea that translation requires the ability to project oneself in the place of another can already be found in *Word and Object* (1962) and even earlier in "The Problem of Meaning in Linguistics" (1953) where he writes:

> But, 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 1953b: 63).

The attempt to put oneself in someone else's shoe, to try and experience the world from their perspective, is core to Quine's understanding of empathy. In later writings he tends to give the term a somewhat wider scope, but two key underlying ideas that empathy is the ability of a subject to project itself onto the mental states of others or to simulate their mental states are central to his conception. The clearest statement of his thinking comes in 1990a, where he writes:

> 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. The knack is comparable, almost, to our ability to recognize faces while unable to sketch or describe them (Quine 1990a: 42-43).

Quine then explains the role empathy plays in the radical translator's attempts at understanding the native's language. Empathy, he believes, remains the guiding principle of the linguist when he moves beyond perceptions and attempts to project grammatical trends and also understand and interpret more complex sentences as well as mental states. He says:

> Empathy guides the linguist still as he rises above observations 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 (Quine 1990a: 43).

He further explains:

> Empathy figures also in the child's acquisition of his first observation sentences. He does not just hear the sentence, see the reported object or event, and then associate the two. He also notes the speaker's orientation, gesture, and facial expression. In his as yet inarticulate way he perceives that the speaker perceives the object or event. When the child puts the sentence to use, there is again a perceiving of perceiving, this time in reverse. The listener, concerned with the child's progress, takes note of his orientation and facial expression. The listener is not satisfied by mere truth of the utterance; the child has to have perceived its truth to win applause (Quine 1995: 89).

Both translation and childhood language acquisition require empathy and in both instances two conditions need to apply: speakers should perceive similar stimuli but also the learner/translator has to perceive that the other speaker is perceiving the same stimuli. An example by Peter Hylton clarifies Quine's point:

> for a child to learn, say, "It's raining" from an adult it is not enough that each of them perceives that it's raining; one of them, at least, must also perceive that the other perceives that it's raining. If the child is to learn this sentence as an observation sentence from the adult then one party or the other—and in practice, presumably, often both—must have the capacity to discriminate not only those occasions

on which it is raining from those on which it is not but also those occasions on which the other party perceives that it is raining from those on which he or she does not. This holds equally for the linguist engaged in radical translation (Hylton 2007: 336).

The radical translator, as in Quine's standard account, constructs a manual of translation through conjectures built on correlations between the native's utterances, her non-verbal behaviour and the goings on in her immediate environment. He relies on the principle of charity by refraining from ascribing glaring falsehoods and favours "translations that ascribe beliefs to the native that stand to reason or are consonant with the native's observed way of life" (Quine 1990a: 46). He also tends to be weary of "complicating the structure to be ascribed to the native's grammar and semantics, for this again would be bad psychology" (*ibid*.). But, most crucially, he, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, will assume that the 'native's mind is 'much like our own'. In doing so, Quine tells us, the translator will be relying on what he calls "practical psychology" and "the method of his psychology is empathy: he imagines himself in the native's situation as best he can" (*ibid*.).

We can experience empathy with non-human animals as well. Through empathy, we are entitled to conclude that the "cat can believe 'A mouse is in there'. The language is that of the ascriber of the attitude, though he projects it empathetically to the creature in the attitude. The cat is purportedly in a state of mind in which the ascriber would say 'A mouse is in there'" (Quine 1990a: 68). Empathy, then, is the medium through which we ascribe propositional attitudes such as 'perceives that' both to human and non-human animals (cf. Quine 1990a: 69).

To take one more example, Quine invites us to consider the case 'Tom perceives the train is late'. Without any deliberate planning or assembling the evidence available, "One empathizes, projecting oneself into Tom's situation and Tom's behavior pattern, and finds thereby that the sentence 'The train is late' is what comes naturally. Such is the somewhat haphazard basis for saying that Tom perceives that the train is late. The basis becomes more conclusive if the observed behavior on Tom's part includes a statement of his own that the train is late" (Quine 1990a: 63). Peter Hylton (2007) argues that, on Quine's account, the sort of empathy required for learning language is the capacity to perceive what someone else is perceiving because we could not learn language at all unless we had empathic capacities of this perceptual kind. This is certainly right and perceptual empathy is certainly one component of Quine's account, but Quine extends the scope of our reliance on empathy beyond the basic projection of observational states to more complex propositional attitudes such as belief. He explains their similarities and differences:

> When we ascribe a belief in the idiom 'x believes that p', our evidence is similar [to the case of ascribing perception] but usually more tenuous. We reflect on the believer's behavior, verbal and otherwise, and what we know of his past, and conjecture that we in his place would feel prepared to assent, overtly or covertly, to the content clause (Quine 1990a: 66).

Empathy also involves cases where we ascribe complex beliefs rather than just basic observational states to other minded creatures, that is cases where we go beyond the sort of states that we might also ascribe to non-human animals. In

such instances, the radical translator, observing the native's behaviour, puts herself in the native's place and attributes to the native beliefs and other mental states that she would have had if she had been in the native's position, in the native's circumstances and cultural context. According to Quine, this projection of thought and ideas, although more tenuous, shares the same basis as the projection of perceptual states.

Quine treats both the shared sense of similarity and innate feelings of empathy, as 'instinctive' features of human psychology. Evolution has inculcated them in us, he thinks, because without them language and learning from each other would not have been possible. However, Quine's reliance on empathy as a prerequisite of translation has raised serious questions regarding the extent of his continued commitment both to behaviourism and to naturalism. Alexander George, for instance, has argued that the introduction of empathy undermines Quine's behaviourism (George 2000: 21-22). Eva Picardi, on the other hand, has found an ambiguity in Quine's account of empathy, a vacillation between a naturalist Darwinian interpretation of empathy vs. a normative Diltheyan view and claims that Quine helps himself to both (Picardi 2000: 132). The authors, I think, have come close to diagnosing the problem that the introduction of the notion of empathy poses for Quine's naturalism, but I do not think they locate the ambiguity and the resulting tension between Quinean naturalism and the normative elements of empathy correctly. In what follows I propose a somewhat different account of the connection and the possible tension between Quine's linguistic naturalism and the normative features of empathy.

Since Quine's first forays into discussions of empathy, there has been much debate on the topic. Indeed, empathy has become a veritable cottage industry, not just in in philosophy and psychology but also in popular culture. In particular, much attention has been paid in distinguishing between different varieties of the phenomenon. In the context of this paper, of particular interest is the distinction between low level, or basic, and high level, more complex, instances of empathy (e.g. Goldman 2011, Stueber 2006) as well as the distinctions between different varieties of higher level empathy.

Low level empathy is standardly characterised as an innate and automatic ability to mimic or mirror some aspects of the mental and emotional states of other minded creatures. In a seminal paper outlining two routes to empathy, Alvin Goldman proposes a distinction between two cognitive systems, or routes, of empathy, what he calls 'mirroring' and 'reconstructive' routes. 'Mirroring empathy' is a form of interpersonal mental isomorphism. The view is based on findings in neuroscience regarding the so-called mirror neurons. The discovery of mirror neurons (see Iacoboni 2009b: 653-55) has given support to the view that a certain 'mental mimicry' or mirroring is experienced by humans, as well as by some other animals, usually at a subconscious level and experience that is essential for both learning from each other and for establishing social communicative ties. Goldman in fact believes that the discovery of mirror neurons provides incontrovertible evidence that low level, basic empathy could be defined as isomorphism or matching conditions between the mental states or experiences of individuals. He writes:

> Since the discovery of mirror neurons and mirroring processes, however, there is much less room for skepticism. There is little doubt about the existence of the processes through which patterns of neural activation in one individual lead, via their

observed manifestations [...], to matching patterns of activations in another individual (Goldman 2011: 33).

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 (Wicker *et al.* 2003). When Quine claims, as we saw above, that the "perception of another's unspoken thought" by means of instinctive empathy is "older than language" or that "an infant just a few days old responds to an adult's facial expression, even to imitating it by the unlearned flexing of appropriate muscles" (Quine 1995: 89), his views seem to be in line with, if not a precursor to, the mirroring route to empathy.

Empathy, understood in term of an innate ability of mimicry, is not normative in any interesting sense, for it operates at a pre-conscious level and is a non-linguistic or pre-linguistic stratum of cognition. Both Alexander George and Eva Picardi fail to take note of this point and do not acknowledge the non-normative character of low level empathy. If Quine were to rely on low level empathy only as a precondition for establishing sameness of observations sentences, then the charge that he is introducing a normative element to his pre-requisite of translation will not stand and his linguistic naturalism will remain unscathed.

The second route to empathy is not purely instinctive or automatic. Goldman calls this higher form of empathy 'reconstructive empathy', but the labels 'perspective taking' and 're-enactive empathy' have also been used (Stueber 2006).[1] Contrary to automatic mirroring, higher empathy is a conscious, reflective process, akin to feeling attuned with the mental states of others. One of its core functions is to ascribe mental states to others, something that goes beyond the more basic sharing of similar perceptual contents. This function itself can take different routes and, as we will see, is performed in at least three different ways. It is this type of empathy, I contend, that goes beyond the natural and inevitably invokes norms.

Quine's thinking about empathy seems to encompass both varieties. When Quine characterizes empathy as the "perception of another's unspoken thought" by means of instinctive empathy and claims that empathy is "older than language" (Quine 1995: 89) or when he talks of "an uncanny knack for empathizing with another's perceptual situation" (Quine 1990a: 42), then his focus is on basic or low level empathy. And when Quine writes

> Empathy is instinctive. Child psychologists tell us that an infant just a few days old responds to an adult's facial expression, even to imitating it by the unlearned flexing of appropriate muscles. Dogs and bears are believed to detect fear and anger in people and other animals, perhaps by smell (Quine 1995: 89)

he seems to be thinking of the basic ability of mirroring that has been attributed to specialised mirror neurons. To the best of my knowledge, Quine does not refer specifically to the then very recent discovery of mirror neurons, but I think it is safe to suggest that he would have indeed welcomed this development and would

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[1] The debates about different forms of empathy have been conducted largely independently of Quine who clearly was a pioneer in the field. Stueber (2006: 212), however, does cite Quine approvingly.

have seen it a vindication of some of his claims.[2] However, Quine does not seem to think that low level empathy is sufficient for learning or translating a language for in various places he seems to be defending different versions of higher level empathy. To reiterate, higher level empathy is needed when the radical translator goes beyond the perceptual level and attempts to attribute beliefs and desires to the subject. An intimation of this view is evident in passages where Quine calls 'empathy' the method of practical psychology (cf. Quine 1990a: 46)—or what in the literature is generally known as 'folk psychology'—and equates it with the ascription of propositional attitudes to minded creatures. Here Quine's focus is on what in contemporary literature is called 'mind-reading', the ascription of propositional attitudes to others. He seems to be thinking about complex and higher level empathy when, in the passage quoted above (Quine 1990a: 43), he argues that empathy rises above observation sentences to cover native's associations. In these instances, the field linguist "observes the native, hears what the native says, and sees the situation. *He empathizes, puts himself in the native's place*" (Quine and Tomida 1992, emphasis added). In this and other similar passages, Quine seems to be thinking of empathy as something similar to Goldman's perspective taking rather than automatic mirroring. He also warns that when we project ourselves into the minds of others, the "farther we venture from simple discourse about familiar concrete things […], the farther apart the checkpoints tend to be spaced" (Quine 1987a: 28), a position that echoes Goldman's view that higher level empathy is more "effortful and constructive", but less reliable than the low level automatic empathy (Goldman 2011: 30).[3]

Eva Picardi locates the ambiguity in Quine's account of empathy and the pull towards a normative account of interpretation in Quine's failure to distinguish between cases where the empathetic translator tries to figure out what the translator himself would do if he were in the native's place and those cases 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 away from behaviourism as classically understood (Picardi 2000: 132), so, on both readings, Picardi argues, Quine forfeits a purely naturalist, behaviourist based account of interpretation and language-learning.

Picardi, I believe, is right in pointing to the absence of finer grained distinctions in Quine's discussions of empathy, but I think, when it comes to the role of what I have called 'higher level empathy', Quine's views could be disambiguated more successfully through Bateson's (2011) distinction between three types of higher level empathy: 1. Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation (i.e., simulation); 2. Imagining how another is thinking and feeling not only based on what the other says and does but also based on our own knowledge of other's character, values and desires (what Bateson calls 'imagine other'); and 3. Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place, 'imagine-self' (or perspective taking). More crucially, contra Picardi, I would like to argue that all three versions of higher empathy involve the exercise of imagination and also rely on

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[2] The first paper discussing the functioning of what came to be called 'mirror neurons' was published in *Experimental Brain Research* (91, 1, 1992: 176-80). An earlier article, 1988, in the same journal (71: 491-507) discussed experiment on macaques—area F5. The term 'mirror 'neuron' was first used in an article in *Brain* (119, 2, 1996: 593-609).

[3] Goldman considers Quine's approach in Quine 1990 as an armchair version of the empirically grounded simulationist approach that he has defended (Goldman 2013: 171).

normative presuppositions. In empathy 1, the exercise of empathy involves imagining the circumstances and situations that other people may face. The empathiser "imagines himself in the native's situation as best he can" (Quine 1990a: 46) and tries to decide what she would do, feel or believe if faced with such circumstances. In Empathy 2 or 'imagine other', the empathiser tries to imagine and surmise how the other person may feel or think based on what she already knows about the other person (as in Quine 1990b: 158). He imagines what the subject of empathy would do given her character and psychological makeup. In empathy 3, or imagine-self, the empathiser puts herself in the other person's shoe (or "sandals" as Quine would say) or engages in counterfactual thinking regarding what the empathiser herself might do if he was the other person (e.g. Quine and Tomida 1992). All three types of empathy involve a leap of imagination, so that the difference between them can be explained in terms of the content of what is being imagined.

Even more importantly, all three variants of higher level empathy, unlike automatic mirroring, explicitly or implicitly rely on normative judgements. As we have seen through various quotations from Quine, his account of empathy moves from low level, automatic, mirroring or mimicry to complex acts of ascribing cultural and contextually informed beliefs and other propositional attitudes resulting in full-blown psychological interpretations of others. Empathising, at the more complex level, is a normative act, while low level automatic empathy arguably is not. The point becomes more clear if we look at Quine's suggested strategy of radical translation involving empathy. According to Quine, the radical translator has to rely on observations of the 'local folkways' of his subjects of translation. "[He] will try as an amateur psychologist to fit his interpretations of the native's sentences to the native's likely beliefs 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" (Quine 1995: 80). Quine is not very clear on what he means by 'local folkways' but I believe he uses the term in the sense coined by the turn of the 20th century American sociologist William Graham Sumner meaning conventions and "learned behaviour, shared by a social group, that provides a traditional mode of conduct" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2016). In Quine's account, the translator, through empathy 1, engages in psychological conjectures as to what the native is likely to believe in specific circumstances, or alternatively, through empathy 2, imagines what the native would believe or feel, given her psychological states and, finally, in empathy 3, the empathiser project herself or reads herself "into the minds of others" (Quine 1987: 28-29). Norms are involved in these acts of imagination and counter-factual thinking because empathic understanding is achieved not just within the context of a physical environment but also within the culturally informed web of beliefs, which have a cultural context and would follow norm infused conventions. Folkways, by definition, are imbued with norms; to imagine what one would believe, do or feel in the background of a folkway or culture will inevitably involve judgements about what the native *ought* to believe based on judgements of reasonableness either by the field linguists' lights or by the standards of what the appropriate beliefs are in the context of the natives' way of life. Whichever of higher level empathic routes 1-3 the radical translator adopts, she imbues her translation of the native's utterances with normative judgements, for she is making decisions about what, all things being equal, the appropriate beliefs and other mental states for the native are, i.e. what it is that the subject should be thinking, believing, entertaining in specific circumstances.

A similar point applies to the calculation of what is that the native is 'likely to believe or do'. In situations of radical translation, Quine claims,

> The translator will depend early and late on psychological conjectures as to what the native is likely to believe. This policy already governed his translations of observation sentences. It will continue to operate beyond the observational level, deterring him from translating a native assertion into too glaring a falsehood. He will favor translations that ascribe belief to the native that stand to reason or are consonant with the native's observed way of life (Quine 1990a: 46).

Such informal probability assignments and conjectures often involve assumptions about the rationality of the other person as well further conjectures about their beliefs regarding what ought to be done in specific circumstances. What the translator maximises, according to Quine, is not truth or agreement with his subject, as Davidson had claimed, "but psychological plausibility according to our intuitive folk-psychology", and he insists that "the folk-psychology involved is very much a matter of empathy" (Quine 1990b: 158).[4] But plausibility is a norm governed idea involving assumptions about what is right or appropriate to believe under specific circumstances. As Putnam might have said, cut the empathic pie any way you like, when it comes to higher level empathy, it is difficult to see how a purely naturalist account would suffice.

If the above is correct, then Quine in his later work introduces a norm-governed, and in that sense a non-natural, component to radical translation. Quine might object that even the so-called 'high level empathy', like its low level counter-part, will be shown to have neurological underpinnings and should therefore be understood in naturalistic terms. I have no doubt that this conjecture is correct; nothing performed by the human mind is free of neurological underpinnings. Indeed, according to Goldman the higher level empathy appears to involve a network of neuronal connections "dedicated to shifting perspective from the immediate environment to an alternative situation" (Goldman 2011: 39). But conceding this point does not affect the normative elements of higher level empathy, just as finding neurological underpinnings for our dispositions to behave morally would not render ethics non-normative.

Could Quine rely solely on the low level automatic mirroring account of empathy in explaining language learning and translation? I think the answer, from Quine's own perspective, has to be in the negative. Mimicking or mirroring, at best, gives the language learner the entry point for acquiring the rudiments of language at observational level, the simplest cases of stimulus and response. But Quine admits that convergence on observation would not enable the language learner to understand and translate complex linguistic communications. There is more to language than simply repeating what other speakers say or reacting in similar ways to similar stimuli. To use and understand a language is to be able to apply it, in appropriate ways, to completely novel circumstances. Mimicking or mirroring the language use of our interlocutors will not deliver the creativity and productivity that the use of language requires.[5]

Could Quine argue that the normative features of empathy are yet another version of instrumental norms that he allows in his naturalized account of

[4] This passage in Quine came to my attention from Zanet 2012: 407.
[5] See for instance Chomsky 1966.

knowledge? This particular escape route is not easy to negotiate either. The normative judgments involved in empathic interpretation, the assignment of propositional attitudes to others, do not have the requisite hypothetical form of instrumental reasoning, nor can they be seen as mere tools for achieving specified epistemic goals; rather they are, as Quine outlines them, part of the conditions for the very act of radical translation and interpretation. They are the starting points of the very endeavour to understand and learn a language, an endeavour that marks us off from other animal species. Quine's naturalist account of language then does not escape the need for normative grounding.[6]

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