Quine's naturalized epistemology and skepticism

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Abstract: When it comes to Quine's position on the naturalization of epistemological inquiry, it is generally considered that as the first and most important step, that position implies the abandonment of Cartesianism and the skepticism it implies. However, here we will argue that such a diagnosis is inappropriate, and that, in principle at least, Quine's attitude towards skepticism, even of the Cartesian type, is much more flexible than is usually thought, and perhaps even than Quine himself thought. In this regard, we will try to show how Quine was actually the one who accepted what Barry Stroud called the 'conditional correctness of skepticism (Cartesianism)' and not the logical positivists, and that the main reason for this is that he recognized the autonomy of the discourse ('epistemology's meta-context') established by Descartes.

1. Introduction

The naturalization of epistemological research is one of the most important projects that Willard Van Orman Quine undertook in his productive career. However, the question remains today as to whether Quine succeeded in this, and most authors who argue that he did not, are mindful of the differences that exist between his program of research into the relationship between observation and science, and the traditional epistemological project of finding a solid foundation for our beliefs about the world.

In other words, in critical reviews of Quine's proposal, attention is most often drawn to the fact that there are differences between these programs that make them incommensurable, hence it follows that, if Quine achieved something with his proposal, it was certainly not a reform of epistemological research.[1] On the other hand – and somewhat on the same line – we have authors

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[1] Perhaps the most famous criticisms that highlight this fact are those of Kim and Putnam: see; Kim, Jaegwon: *What is "Naturalized epistemology"?*, and; Putnam, Hilary: *Why reason can't be naturalized.*

such as Barry Stroud who, in evaluating different approaches in epistemology, came to the conclusion that their validity was largely determined by the extent to which post-Descartes authors took seriously skeptical or Cartesian doubts. So, for example, among the authors who took these doubts seriously, Stroud primarily includes Kant and the logical positivists, and he points out how the positivists, above all, Carnap, by declaring it meaningless, came to a "destructive conclusion" in relation to Cartesian skepticism, but that they could not have come to such a conclusion if they had not, as he says, shown a certain understanding of what a traditional epistemologist does: "Carnap (...) is fully in sympathy and even total agreement with the philosopher's (Cartesian, A/N) skeptical conclusion – or at least with what it would be if it were intelligible" (Stroud 1984: 179).

Thus, we can say that, in Stroud's opinion at least, the key point of separation between Quine's and some other positions in the critique of traditional epistemology concerns the relationship to the problem of skepticism that is at its center, which is, if not completely ignored, in Quine's case taken lightly. However, although we basically agree with Stroud's assessment of the importance of the attitude towards Cartesian skepticism in epistemology, in this paper we will try to show how Quine is actually the one who accepts the idea of its 'conditional correctness' and not the positivists. In other words, we will try to draw attention to how, contrary to the common view, Quine's approach is much more tolerant of skepticism, even a Cartesian one, than is usually thought; hence, it should follow that Quine was not so much against skepticism but some other features of Cartesianism, such as, above all, a first-person perspective in the evaluation of our knowledge claims.

2. Quine's naturalism and Cartesianism

Naturalism is the view that once Quine adopted it, he never abandoned afterwards, and which in Gibson's opinion best sums up his entire philosophy.[2] However, for Quine it is primarily a "recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described" (Quine 1981: 21).

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[2] For more detailed information on this, see; Gibson, Roger: *Enlightened Empiricism: An examination of W. V. Quine's theory of knowledge*.

Although it is general, this Quine's attitude was a reaction to a negative situation in his opinion that largely continues to this day, and in which philosophers enjoy a privileged position when it comes to answering what is considered to be the most important epistemological problem – the problem of validity or justification of our theories about the world. It is usually considered that the great French philosopher René Descartes, whose approach to the mentioned problem necessarily affirms speculative (philosophical) means in solving it, is the most responsible for this situation.

Namely, Descartes thought that for a belief to qualify as knowledge, it has to be either basic (or such that it is not possible to express any coherent doubt about it, nor to refer to other beliefs to justify it), or such that it is ultimately deducible from basic beliefs. Descartes found the basis for this claim in something that would later be called the epistemic priority of sensory experience, which was grounded in the so-called general gap that was supposed to exist between it and things that are the common objects of our knowledge (such as, for example, objects found in space): "To say that things of one sort are 'epistemically prior' or prior in the order of knowledge to things of another sort is to say that things of the first sort are knowable without any things of the second sort being known, but not *vice versa*. (...) There are certain things we could know about our sensory experiences or about how things appear to us even if nothing were known about the existence of any independent objects in space. Those sensory experiences or those facts about the way things appear to us are therefore epistemically prior to facts about the external world" (Stroud 1984: 141).

In other words, in order to have confidence in our beliefs, Descartes promoted the approach that we must test them by exposing them all to doubt. Having exposed them all to doubt, Descartes came to the conclusion that the only beliefs immune to it are those concerning our sensory states, hence it follows that "we should have no confidence in any of our pretheoretical beliefs (...) because we have reason to believe that any of them might be false" (Kornblith 1999: 159).

Thus, the most important lesson to be learnt from these lines, and which is above all Descartes' epistemological legacy, is that our theory of knowledge or epistemological theory should be "logically prior to any empirical knowledge" (Ibid.). However, since it turns out that we believe in many things that are not and cannot be part of the reports about our sensory states,

and given that the consistent application of Descartes' method allows to set such demands that would make any knowledge claim impossible – even those concerning the content of our sensory states – the above situation resulted in skepticism being permanently associated with epistemological inquiry, and the program of (traditional) epistemology or 'first philosophy' becoming a program of more or less witty dealing with the skeptic.[3] However, Quine believed that this skepticism, although expected, was largely unjustified.

Namely, while Quine did not deny the importance of the epistemological project in general, in contrast to most of his predecessors and contemporaries, he thought that when it comes to the starting point for evaluating our beliefs about the world, there is really no room for something like 'first philosophy'. In other words, Quine questions the justification of doubts that come from the so-called extra-theoretical position such as the philosophical one, which makes us use methods, in order to dispel them, whose true value and results cannot be objectively evaluated or empirically verified. It follows that the only doubts that would be legitimate for Quine are in fact those concerning problems that are solvable at least in principle, which is why they are equal to the doubts we come across in common scientific practice: "Epistemology is best looked upon (…) as an enterprise within natural science. Cartesian doubt is not the way to begin. Retaining our present beliefs about nature, we can still ask how we can have arrived at them" (Quine 1975: 68).

Generally speaking, in his call for the naturalization of epistemological inquiry, Quine was primarily guided by the above-mentioned idea that reality should be identified and described within science itself, and not some *a priori* philosophy, and at the same time for the thesis that will be in the foudation of his program – that "epistemology is best looked upon (...) as an enterprise within natural science", as well as that, therefore, "Cartesian doubt is not the way to begin" (Ibid.). However, apart from his dissatisfaction with the existing situation, Quine thought that there was a rational basis for his proposal which would fully affirm scientific methods in resolving epistemological disputes. This basis was found in the thesis that the epistemological

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[3] Namaly, Descartes himself came to the conclusion that our basic beliefs can also be doubted, because it is possible to imagine a situation in which, when evaluating them, we are deceived by an evil demon. We will see that these skeptical scenarios concerning basic beliefs later took on different forms, but their essence remained the same, that is, each of them was constructed in order to question truth or justification of beliefs on which we should base all others.

problem (as he saw it, *as an attempt to answer the question of how science really developed and how we acquired it*) is in fact scientific, because "[S]cience tells us that our only source of information about the external world is through the impact of light rays and molecules upon our sensory surfaces. Stimulated in these ways, we somehow evolve an elaborate and useful science. How do we do this, and why does the resulting science work so well? These are genuine questions, and no feigning of doubt is needed to appreciate them. They are scientific questions about a species of primates, and they are open to investigation in natural science, the very science whose acquisition is being investigated" (Quine 1975: 68).[4]

3. Precursors of Quine's anti-Cartesianism

Thus, there is no doubt that Quine's attitude towards the traditional epistemological program that Descartes bequeathed to us was extremely negative. On the other hand, he will also offer an alternative, naturalistic framework as, in his opinion, more plausible and within which, therefore, epistemological inquiry should be conducted.

Namely, since in the spirit of empiricism Quine believed that everything that a subject is 'or ever hopes to be is due to irritations of its surface' (see, Quine 1976: 228), he approached the subject matter of epistemology through something that can be called, for the sake of convenience, general epistemic situation. This situation implies referring to elementary conditions of any knowledge, while its generality consists in the fact that these conditions are universal and unchangeable, and imply a human subject "accorded [to] a certain experimentally controlled input, certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies" who, prompted by them

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[4] In other words, Quine starts from the thesis that the source of all our knowledge is the proximal stimulus on the surfaces of our sensory receptors that we receive from the external world. Since philosophical doctrines, including Descartes', should satisfy this initial condition just as any other cognitive content, then philosophy does not have a privileged place as Descartes thought, but Quine sees it in continuity with other types of inquiry: "The philosopher's task differs from others (...) in detail, but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile" (Quine 1960: 275-276).

somehow creates 'an elaborate and useful science', i.e. "in the fullness of time (...) delivers as output a description of a three-dimensional external world and its history" (Quine 2008: 533).

In a word, in the idea of a subject 'sitting in a physical world' whose 'forces impinge on its surface', but who, for his part, strikes back, 'emanating concentric airwaves which take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, light rays, retinas, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil' (see, Quine 1976: 228) Quine finds a suitable starting point, but also a problem that needs be solved. This problem primarily consists in the fact that everything that the subject delivers over time as output, exceeds by far what he is capable of receiving through input, which is why the subject matter of epistemology becomes the inquiry into this very relation – relation between meager *input*, and torrential *output*.

Broadly speaking, this is the framework in which Quine attempted to place epistemological inquiry, and which, in his opinion, besides enabling the introduction of scientific methods into those investigations, also implies the complete abandonment of traditional assumptions and Cartesian skepticism. However, it should be borne in mind that Quine was by no means alone when it comes to the negative attitude towards Cartesianism, i.e., that, even before his attempt to naturalize epistemological inquiry, there were, among other things, quite strong anti-Cartesian sentiments expressed by the authors who had the greatest influence on the formation of Quine's philosophical views.

Thus, for example, in reaction to Cartesian skepticism, which, as we have said, renders all our beliefs about the external world unjustified, the great American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce will hold that certain beliefs should be treated as fixed and unchangeable, finding the justification in the thesis that doubting them would block the way of any inquiry. Namely, according to Peirce, the biggest sin that we can commit in science is to 'block the way of inquiry', and in the history of philosophy, Cartesian skepticism is precisely such an example. In other words, not only are Cartesian doubts a threat to our common knowledge claims, tending to present them all as unjustified, they threaten to call into question the justification of our overall inquiry practice. However, Peirce observes that they are also incapable of motivating inquiry, which is why they are not 'genuine' but 'paper' doubts.

Therefore, Peirce neutralizes Descartes' skepticism with the thesis that only phenomena that cannot fit into existing explanatory schemes can motivate inquiry, and the condition for their emergence is that there is something fixed and unchangeable, something that cannot be doubted. Something fixed and unchangeable are the so-called background beliefs, and if we were to doubt them like all other beliefs, we would block the way to inquiry.[5] On the other hand, when we talk about Quine's immediate predecessors, logical positivists will come to the conclusion that Cartesian skepticism is unjustified primarily because questioning claims such as that the objective world is unknowable would overcome all known methods of (empirical) verification.

Namely, advocating for a program "which recognizes only sense perception and the analytic principles of logic as sources of knowledge" (Reichenbach 1949: 310) and, according to which "all our meaningful concepts are logically constructed from the basis of unanalyzed and unprocessed perceptual data" (Misak 1995: 58), positivists will for meaningful and legitimate take only those concepts whose statements meet this requirement, that is, which constitute "axiomatic system which is given empirical meaning by definitions which hook up primitive terms in the formal language with observables in the world" (Ibid., 56). In a word, although, as we shall see later, they will inherit much from Cartesianism, positivists will completely ignore the lessons of its skepticism, primarily because they did not correspond to the standards they set. Moreover, taught by those same standards, they will declare the skeptical position extra-theoretical or external to our belief system, thus banishing the skeptic's statements, along with all other statements made from similar (external) positions, to the 'dump of metaphysical nonsense'.

4. Differences between Quine's and positivist anti-Cartesianism

Therefore, when it comes to the attitude towards Cartesian skepticism, some of Quine's most important predecessors are the founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, but also logical

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[5] "Any of our beliefs might be false, but it would be absurd to doubt them all because of this. If we did, we would not possess a body of stable belief by which to judge new evidence and hypotheses, and hence, we would block the path of inquiry" (Misak 2004: 13).

positivists. However, in evaluating different approaches in epistemology, Stroud comes to a conclusion – which we believe to be justified – thattheir validity was largely determined by the extent to which post-Descartes scholars took seriously skeptical or Cartesian doubts. In this regard, we mentioned at the beginning how he first of all highlighted the positivists and Kant as authors whose criticisms can be understood as valid, primarily because, although they did not accept his conclusions, they nevertheless had 'shown certain understanding' of what a traditional epistemologist does.

To be precise, Stroud will consider that the prerequisite for a convincing critique of the traditional epistemological approach and the rejection of Cartesian skepticism consists in the prior adoption of the idea of its 'conditional correctness'. In this regard, although Peirce's omission (or rather, non-mention) in this sense may seem justified, given the foregoing, this seems rather unusual when it comes to positivists. With this in mind, in what follows we will draw attention to how, if not entirely wrong, Stroud's judgment of the positivists is rather forced; moreover, we will try to show how, unlike the positivists, it is Quine who actually accepts what Stroud calls 'the conditional correctness of skepticism', but to do all this it will be necessary to go back to the basics.

As we said, by implementing the method of doubt, Descartes came to the conclusion of the existence of a 'general gap' between the content of our sensory states on the one hand and the objects that are the usual object of our knowledge on the other hand, which is why he divided all our beliefs "into two groups: those which need support from others and those which can support others and need no support themselves" (Dancy 1989: 53). However, it turned out that the result which Descartes reached about beliefs that don't need any support is that it does not really matter what impressions the subject has, or what the specific content of his impressions is, but *the fact that he has certain ideas (impressions)* and that he cannot be wrong in this respect. On the other hand, although they inherited the idea of an asymmetry between epistemically prior and all other beliefs, positivists believed in continuity between them, and this assumption was crucial to their project of rational reconstruction of knowledge by reducing it to reports about sensory states.[6]

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[6] Namely, although positivists rejected Cartesianism, they believed in something which is its consequence – that there is so-called *a priori* knowledge not open to the usual methods of (empirical) verification, but which, despite

In other words, *the content of our impressions* was crucial for positivists because the justification of beliefs that do not concern immediate experience was supposed to be based on it, by reducing all other statements to statements about sensory impressions. However, in order to succeed in the intention of rational reconstruction of knowledge, it was necessary to reestablish the continuity between subject and object which was broken by Descartes' approach – more precisely, by Descartes' skepticism. By pointing to the so-called extra-theoretical or external character of the position from which skeptical objections are made, the positivists have done so by not even accepting the conclusion Descartes reached, declaring, as we have seen, this whole aspect of his doctrine to be meaningless.

Although, generally speaking, this is commonly thought to be the main problem that Quine had with it, our thesis is that he did not even consider skepticism, even as radical as Cartesian, to be meaningless, but that the position which led Descartes to it was incoherent and unjustified.

Naimly, the common view is that, similarly to positivists, Quine's most important step in criticizing Cartesian epistemology consisted in denying that philosophical doubts have a special status. However, if we looked at philosophical skepticism from a holistic perspective according to which there is no important difference between philosophy and other types of inquiry (at least in Quine's case)[7], there was a danger that Cartesian doubts would prove to be justified, because in that case they would not be external to our system of beliefs.[8] However, what Quine does not

this, has the character of infallibility. In addition to analytic truths (statements of logic and mathematics), this knowledge would also consist of statements about the content of immediate experience (the so-called observation statements) which they thought could serve, having neutralized skepticism, in deducing the objective world from subjective impressions (rational reconstruction of knowledge).

[7]As is well known, Quine saw the totality of our knowledge/beliefs as a unique system or network that only touches experience at its edges, and within which there is continuity between philosophical, scientific and common sense assumptions. For more detailed information on this, see: Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*.

[8] With the thesis that skeptical doubts are in fact scientific doubts, and that "science, construed as the effort to adjust our conceptual scheme and root out errors, might well be impossible without them" (Wrenn 2008: 81), Quine believed that skepticism – even as radical as Cartesian one – was actually an "offshoot of science", justifying this thesis by pointing out that "doubt prompts the theory of knowledge (...) but knowledge, also, was what prompted the doubt" (Quine 1975: 67).

accept is that we can, as Descartes does, believe in the existence of infallible truths on the one hand and in unlimited skepticism regarding our beliefs about the external world on the other, and this very fact makes his position incoherent.

In other words, the contradictory requirements listed here make Descartes' position *both external and internal* to our system of beliefs, and since they cannot be reconciled except by adopting a counterintuitive conclusion that the objective world is unknowable, hence the skepticism about the possibility of our knowledge of the external world. However, when we talk about the difference between Quine's and positivist anti-Cartesianism, we should keep in mind that, given Quine's fallibilism, the premise that he finds unacceptable is not the one that calls our beliefs into doubt, but the one that asserts infallibility. In this respect, it can be said that Quine accepts skepticism – "but surely, 'fallibilism' is a better term" (Bergström 2008: 41) – but does not accept that the only legitimate standpoint in evaluating our beliefs is the first-person perspective, because precisely this is *external to our system of beliefs* – i.e. the position it implies – just like *any standpoint would be for Quine from which any kind of infallibility would be asserted*.

5. 'Conditional correctness of skepticism' and 'epistemology's meta-context'

Therefore, although Quine rejected its Cartesian form, as shown in section 2, he accepted skepticism primarily because it is entirely in line with his fallibilism, the thesis that "no element in our total theory of the world is immune to revision" (Ibid.). On the other hand, holding that certain statements are infallible, such as, above all, reports on the content of someone's immediate experience, this is something that positivists have not inherited.[9] However, apart from

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[9] Since Quine himself, as we have seen, also starts from the first person (knowing subject), the question can be raised as to how he intends to overcome the 'egocentric predicament' characteristic of traditional epistemology and Cartesianism in general, and in response to it we can point out Quine's theses regarding the intersubjective (objective) character of sensory data. Namely, in contrast to the positivist position, where they "constitute the sort of immediate extra-theoretical given" (Hilton 2010: 87), thanks to behavior in observable circumstances, in Quine, what is valid for physical objects traditionally dealt with by special sciences will in principle be equally valid for sensory data that philosophy deals with. In other words, referring to the assumptions of the behaviorist doctrine and his so-called externalized empiricism, Quine will consider that everything that the subject experiences by receiving

being inclined to skepticism, we argue that, by postulating the fundamental level of inquiry such as epistemological, Quine also accepted something that Stroud called 'conditional correctness' of its Cartesian version, which, however, cannot be said of the positivists.

Namely, we saw how, in explaining that positivists adopted the thesis about the 'conditional correctness of skepticism', Stroud pointed out that they could not have otherwise reached their 'destructive conclusion' that Cartesian skepticism is meaningless: "If the traditional philosopher did manage to raise a meaningful question about our knowledge of the world, his skeptical answer to it would be correct. Only if that conditional is true will the problem be meaningless" (Stroud 1984: 179) and since the question posed by traditional philosopher is an external, i.e. pseudo-question, it is meaningless according to the above criteria. However, despite Stroud's claims, we do not see why it was necessary to adopt the thesis on 'conditional correctness of skepticism' for this conclusion. Namely, even if we have grounds for claimingthat a position is external and thus meaningless, it does not mean that the position is skeptical.[10] However, we believe that the main indicator of the fact that positivists and Carnap, unlike Quine, did not adopt the assumption of conditional correctness of skepticism is that they did not accept the idea of the autonomy of the fundamental level of inquiry such as epistemological. When it comes to Quine, apart from the fact that he intended to reform it, it can be pointed out in defense of this view that, contrary to most scholars mentioned so far, there is a large group of those who saw Cartesian doubts as a real obstacle to knowledge, arguing that, thanks to them, it cannot be justified in an absolute sense.

Namely, it turned out that if we accept the logical criterion used by Descartes in evaluating knowledge claims, we can imagine a situation in which, in the process of acquiring knowledge or receiving impressions from the external world, the subject is deceived by a mad scientist – who

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impressions from the external environment is subject to objective methods of study, i.e., "open to scientific study" (Quine 1975: 68). For more information on Quine's externalized (enlightened) empiricism, see: Gibson, Roger: *Enlightened Empiricism: An examination of W. V. Quine's theory of knowledge*.

[10]Also, it is not quite clear why is this conclusion destructive to Cartesianism as Stroud claims it to be, because just as it may seem from the positivist perspective that the Cartesian standpoint is meaningless, the same could be said for their standpoint from Descartes' perspective – or that, if nothing else, it is also arbitrary, as shown by Neurath. See, Neurath, Oto, *Protokol-satze*.

produces his impressions through interventions in his brain – or an evil demon, in the spirit of Cartesianism. Although these scenarios may be implausible, we cannot obtain evidence that they have not been realized, which is why some scholars (David Lewis, Robert Nozick, Fred Dretske and others) undertook the task of developing strategies at least for mitigating their negative effects on our knowledge claims. They found a way to do this primarily by pointing out the fact that our knowledge is largely contextually determined, so even if we cannot justify it in an absolute sense, we can do it in a relative sense.

We are not aware that Quine ever set forth his attitude about contextualism, but it can be safely assumed that it would have been markedly negative, and the reasons for this will be given below.[11] Nevertheless, we will argue that Quine intended to operate within that approach, or, if this is too strong, that there is a certain affinity between him and contextualists (and ultimately, Descartes) that does not exist between them and positivists or Peirce. This affinity is primarily reflected in the fact that although Quine did not accept its theoretical and methodological assumptions, unlike Peirce and the positivists, he nevertheless *accepted the idea of the autonomy of epistemological discourse* that contextualism embodies better than any other tradition. However, certain problems arise here regarding the position we want to attribute to Quine, i.e. his attitude towards the epistemological program thus identified which is why it will be useful to adopt Michael Williams' terminology and the term 'epistemology's meta-context' when we speak of it.

By introducing the term 'epistemology's meta-context', we want to draw attention (which was also Williams' intention) to the specificities of the epistemological discourse which implies certain methodological assumptions or 'methodological necessities' whose adoption is a prerequisite for using it.[12] In this sense, when we argue that Quine's attitude towards

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[11] In fact, we are aware only of Quine's argument against a scenario in which a subject is deceived by a mad scientist, who intervenes in his brain to produce the impressions he has. Namely, Quine believes that, although something like this is logically possible, it is nevertheless 'technologically impossible', which is completely in the spirit of his naturalism and what it allows.

[12] See: Williams, Michael, Contextualism, externalism and epistemic standards, *Philosophical studies 103*, 2001; and Knowledge, reflection and skeptical hypothesis, *Erkenntnis 61*, 2004.

contextualism would be negative, we do not mean that the reason for this, as it is commonly believed, is that Quine saw the quest for certainty initiated by Descartes and followed by contextualists as a pointless task – because when Quine states, as an argument against Cartesianism in epistemology, that its ultimate motivation (the Cartesian quest for certainty) turned out to be 'a lost cause' (see, Quine 2008: 530), he puts forward a view that his fallibilism already presupposes – but primarily because the assumptions of 'epistemology's meta-context' maintained by Descartes and adopted by contextualists are untenable. One of these assumptions, certainly the most significant one, is the assumption about the infallibility of the first-person perspective, entailing both Cartesian skepticism and the thesis that knowledge as such is *not open to scientific study*, which is why contextualists finally approach it using the speculative (philosophical) methods of inquiry that Quine intended to eradicate.[13] However, what makes Quine's program close to the contextualist and what, in our view, justifies the view that he accepted the "conditional correctness of skepticism" is the fact that, just like the contextualists, Quine saw the epistemological context *as an autonomous context of inquiry* with its own set of methodological assumptions or 'methodological necessities'. Although, as we have seen, in Quine's case these assumptions are significantly different from those of the contextualists – which will open numerous, very serious questions such as 'does, with his proposal of its naturalization, Quine remains within the framework of epistemological theory or abandons it?' – what is important is that the key motive for rejecting the Cartesian approach in Quine's case does not lie so much in its incoherence, or some supposed unjustification of doubts such as Cartesian

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[13] Some of the strategies used by contextualists to neutralize skeptical scenarios include the strategy of relevant alternatives (which draws attention to the fact that, as a cause of error, the skeptical scenario is not one of them), possible worlds (where, if realized, that scenario is in the most distant of possible worlds), or conversational standards that are lowered and raised depending on the demands of the conversation, where our knowledge is assumed to be preserved in contexts where these standards are relatively low. For more detailed information on contextualism, see for example: Lewis, David, *Elusive knowledge*, Australian journal of philosophy 74; DeRose, Keith, *How can we now that we're not brains in vats*?, Southern journal of philosophy 38; Heller, Mark, *Relevant alternatives and closure*, Australian journal of philosophy 77; Harman, Gilbert, *Epistemic contextualism as a theory of primary speaker meaning*, Philosophy and phenomenological research 75; Pritchard, Duncan, *Closure and context*, Australian journal of philosophy 78.

(although he himself will sometimes point out these reasons), but actually in a prejudice about the infallibility of the first-person perspective that this approach promotes.[14]

6. Conclusion

Thus, although there is an important difference between correctness of skepticism accepted by contextualists, and 'conditional correctness of skepticism' accepted by Quine, it is important that Quine would not reject skepticism *per se*, if placed in an adequate, in his case therefore, naturalistic framework. However, what is of special importance and what, after all, allowed us to attribute to Quine the adoption of the conditional correctness of skepticism is first of all that very framework, that is, the idea of the autonomy of the epistemological context of inquiry that it implies.

In other words, although the criticisms of Cartesianism that draw attention to the external characterof position from which sceptical objections are made that we had with the positivists, or unmotivated doubts that it implies that we encounter in Peirce invoke the viewpoint that was advocated by Quine himself, a fact that, in our opinion, makes Quine's position different from the above is that he recognized the autonomy or distinctiveness of the discourse established by Descartes. This is the key reason on which we put forward the thesis that the positivists and Peirce did not adopt the idea of the conditional correctness of skepticism.[15] On the other hand, it

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[14] In addition to the above, one of Quine's frequent objections to Cartesian skepticism was that it represents a 'form of extremism', that is, that the skeptic's reaction is 'exaggeration'. However, one should not think that it is its radicalism that Quine could not acceptsince he also advocated controversial and radical views, like leaving open the possibility of questioning elementary truths of logic and mathematics (see, *Two dogmas of empiricism*). With this in mind, our attempt to show how Quine was much more tolerant of skepticism, even Cartesian, than is usually thought should be understood not so much as a response to Quine's critics (above all, Stroud), but as a certain clarification of Quine's own views, which, even the interpreters who were sympathetic to them, often led on the wrong path when it comes to understanding Quine's epistemological position.

[15] To say this does not mean to advocate the view that these things are necessarily connected, but rather to arguethat Quine's acceptance of conditional correctness of skepticism was a prerequisite for using epistemological context only because it is a *prerequisite for adopting as coherent the idea of any inquiry*. In this regard, contrary to

also contains the justification for our linking of Quine's and contextualist programs, and if, given the differences between them, the question still arises on what grounds we have done this, it will be useful in the end to confront the positivist and contextualist traditions.

Although links with Cartesianism are present in both of these traditions, we have seen that they are much stronger, or rather, more consistent in contextualism. In fact, we believe that contextualism is the only typically Cartesian program in epistemology, and it is characterized, *inter alia*, by the assumption which Quine also advocated – that epistemological context is *autonomous context of inquiry* which, as such, has its own set of methodological assumptions or 'necessities'. Although Quine intended to modify most of these assumptions, thinking that it is necessary to approach problems of knowledge in the objective spirit that animates natural science, while contextualists approached it only in a speculative manner that animates philosophy, the conclusion is that by accepting skepticism in general, Quine also accepted skepticism in epistemological context; however, Quine did not accept the idea of epistemic privilege found both in contextualists and the positivists, which is, in his view, responsible for all the negative effects of Cartesianism both on logical positivism and on epistemology in general.

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what Peirce believed, we have seen that Cartesian skepticism has proved more than capable of motivating inquiry, and contextualism is the best example. On the other hand, although they declared skepticism meaningless, the impression is that all the positivists did in their projects of rational reconstruction of knowledge was the exercise of *a norm* into which things fit or do not fit, but in which it is difficult to speak of any kind of inquiry except in some broadest, and therefore, inappropriate sense of the word.

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