2.2 Optional theme: epistemology

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____ **Total: 30 marks**

KEY WORDS epistemology • knowledge • justified true belief • scepticism • rationalism • empiricism • a priori

Objective

Study the optional theme **epistemology** : what **knowledge** is, whether we can answer the **sceptic** , and where knowledge comes from (**reason** or **experience**).

You must be able to:

- explain the justified true belief account and the Gettier problem
- explain Descartes' method of doubt and his answer to scepticism
- distinguish rationalism and empiricism
- distinguish a priori and a posteriori knowledge
- evaluate an answer to scepticism

1 Key knowledge and worked examples

■ What is knowledge?

The classic account: S knows that P if (1) P is **true**, (2) S **believes** P, and (3) S is **justified** in believing P: **justified true belief** . **Edmund Gettier** (1963) gave cases of justified true belief that are not knowledge, because the belief is true by luck. *Example*: you look at a stopped clock that happens to show the right time. Your belief is true and justified, but you do not know the time.

■ Scepticism

The **sceptic** asks how we can know anything. **Descartes' method of doubt** (1641): doubt everything that can be doubted: the senses (illusions), whether you are awake (dreams), even mathematics (an evil demon). One thing survives: *I think, therefore I am* (*cogito*). Modern version: the "brain in a vat".

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■ **Sources of knowledge**

view	claim	thinkers
rationalism	some knowledge comes from reason alone	Descartes, Leibniz
empiricism	all knowledge comes from experience	Locke, Hume

A priori knowledge is known without experience ("all triangles have three angles"). **A posteriori** knowledge needs experience ("water boils at 100 °C at sea level"). Kant argued some knowledge is both a priori and informative ("synthetic a priori"), e.g. that every event has a cause.

2 Practice

2.1 State the **three** conditions of the justified-true-belief account of knowledge. [2]

2.2 Explain how the **stopped-clock** case is a **Gettier case**. [3]



stopped

but shows 3:00 at 3:00

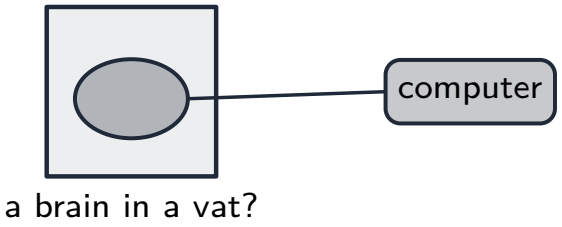
2.3 Explain **two** stages of Descartes' **method of doubt**. [4]

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2.4 Classify each statement as **a priori** or **a posteriori**, and give a reason: (a) "A bachelor is an unmarried man." (b) "Water boils at 100 °C at sea level." (c) "7 + 5 = 12." Then explain **one** reason why the empiricist finds (c) a hard case. [6]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 *(Optional theme style.)* "We cannot know anything for certain." Evaluate this claim. [15]



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Solutions

Marking: **M1** a correct method, **A1** the correct answer, **B1** an independent mark.

Each answer shows the steps, then the **result**.

2.1

P is true; S believes P; S is justified in believing P

2.2

the belief "it is 3 o'clock" is true, because it happens to be 3 o'clock; it is justified: the clock has always been reliable; but it is true by luck, since the clock has stopped, so it is not knowledge: JTB is not enough

2.3

any two, explained: the senses sometimes deceive, e.g. a stick looks bent in water, so they cannot give certainty; dreams: there is no sure sign to tell waking from dreaming, so the whole world might be a dream; the evil demon: a powerful being might deceive even about mathematics; the cogito: even if deceived, I must exist to be deceived

2.4

(a) a priori: true by the meaning of the words; (b) a posteriori: known by observation and experiment; (c) a priori: known by reason without experiment; reasons given for each; hard case: it seems necessary and certain, yet not learned by experience; empiricists must explain it as relations of ideas (Hume) or as learned by counting (Mill)

3.1

Mark with the markbands: [13-15] clearly focused on the question, clear explanation of the philosophical issue, relevant philosophers and arguments used accurately, counter-arguments evaluated, well-developed critical analysis, different perspectives evaluated, a reasoned conclusion; [10-12] focused, mostly accurate knowledge, analysis with some evaluation; [7-9] some focus, relevant knowledge, mostly narrative or description with limited analysis; [4-6] little focus, limited knowledge, mostly narrative; [1-3] little understanding of the question. Points that may be included: explains the claim and the meaning of certainty; sceptical arguments: illusions, dreams, the evil demon or the brain in a vat; Descartes' cogito as one certain truth; objection: the cogito shows only that thinking happens, not a lasting self; a priori truths such as logic and mathematics; empiricist reply: knowledge without certainty: probable, fallible knowledge is still knowledge; Moore's "here is one hand" reply; contextualism or the JTB debate (Gettier); evaluation: whether knowledge needs certainty; a reasoned conclusion

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