# Uncertainty-Calibrated Closed-Loop Simulation for Autonomous Driving Evaluation

Anonymous CVPR submission

Paper ID *****

## Abstract

*Simulation is a cornerstone of autonomous vehicle (AV) development, yet most simulators produce deterministic or uncalibrated stochastic outputs. This paper addresses the critical limitation of unreliable confidence estimation in simulation by proposing an uncertainty-calibrated framework. We explicitly model and propagate epistemic uncertainty in both agent behavior and sensor simulation. A risk-aware closed-loop evaluation protocol is introduced, along with a novel metric, Risk-Weighted Simulation Error (RWSE), which incorporates simulator confidence into performance assessment. Experiments on scenarios derived from the nuScenes dataset demonstrate that our calibrated simulator provides more reliable safety assessments, with collision risk estimates in rare scenarios reducing underestimation bias from* $37\,\%$ *to* $5\,\%$ *compared to proxy real-world risk indicators, and improves reinforcement learning policy robustness, increasing success rate by* $14.8\,\%$ *(relative) and reducing catastrophic failures by* $44\,\%$ *(p ¡ 0.05). Our analysis reveals that while deterministic simulators produce artificially low collision rates due to lack of behavioral stochasticity, they fail to capture tail risks. The computational overhead of our ensemble approach (3.2x slowdown) is justified by the substantial gains in evaluation reliability. These results indicate that calibration is a critical complement to realism for trustworthy simulation-based AV evaluation and training.*

## 1. Introduction

The development and validation of autonomous vehicles (AVs) face a fundamental challenge: exhaustive on-road testing is economically infeasible, time-consuming, and ethically problematic when exposing the public to immature systems [12]. Simulation has thus emerged as an indispensable tool, accelerating the development cycle from perception algorithms to high-level planning [6]. Modern simulators are no longer used merely for offline evaluation; they increasingly support closed-loop training, reinforcement learning (RL), and safety certification, where the AV's decisions directly influence the simulated world [18]. Consequently, the reliability of simulation outputs is critical—yet largely unexamined. Recent advances in rendering, sensor modeling, and multi-agent behavior have dramatically improved the realism of driving simulators [14]. However, these advances often operate under an implicit and potentially dangerous assumption: every simulated scenario is treated as equally trustworthy. In practice, a simulator's reliability should depend strongly on context, including the density of available training data, the complexity of agent interactions, and the presence of rare or out-of-distribution events [2]. A deterministic or overconfident stochastic simulator may produce visually plausible rollouts in common situations while failing catastrophically in corner cases, leading to two critical risks: over-optimistic safety assessments and brittle learned policies. Simulators that cannot express their own uncertainty may systematically underestimate the true risk of rare but dangerous scenarios, potentially certifying unsafe systems [1]. Furthermore, reinforcement learning agents trained in overconfident simulators may exploit simulator idiosyncrasies and fail to generalize to real-world conditions where uncertainty is inherent [16]. These failure modes are especially concerning in safety-critical domains, where rare events dominate overall risk and where misleading confidence can be more dangerous than obvious errors [11]. This paper argues that for safety-critical applications, calibration—the ability of a simulator to accurately quantify its own confidence—is as important as realism. In safety-critical evaluation, we define uncertainty correctness operationally: an uncertainty estimate is considered correct if it exhibits a monotonic relationship with downstream risk indicators (e.g., collision likelihood or near-miss frequency), rather than satisfying exact probabilistic optimality [8]. This definition reflects the decision-theoretic role of uncertainty in safety assessment, where relative risk ordering is often more important than perfectly calibrated probabilities. We present an uncertainty-calibrated simulation

framework that explicitly models and propagates epistemic uncertainty in both agent behavior and sensor simulation. Our framework produces not only plausible rollouts but also well-calibrated confidence estimates, using ensemble-based behavior modeling and learned sensor noise models. Building on this capability, we introduce a risk-aware closed-loop evaluation protocol that conditions safety metrics on the simulator's reported uncertainty. As part of this protocol, we propose a novel metric, Risk-Weighted Simulation Error (RWSE), which penalizes confident errors more severely than uncertain ones, aligning evaluation outcomes with safety-relevant decision making. Comprehensive experiments on nuScenes-based scenarios demonstrate that the proposed calibrated simulator provides more reliable safety estimates, reducing underestimation bias in rare scenarios by 18–25%, and yields reinforcement learning policies with significantly improved out-of-distribution robustness. Our results show that high-fidelity but uncalibrated simulators can be misleading, whereas even simpler simulators, when properly calibrated, can offer more trustworthy guidance for safety-critical development [20]. Overall, this work bridges the gap between high-fidelity simulation and reliable uncertainty quantification, providing a practical framework for AV developers to understand not only what a simulator predicts, but how much those predictions should be trusted. Unlike prior work that estimates uncertainty solely as an internal modeling artifact, we treat uncertainty as a first-class simulation output, explicitly consumed by evaluation metrics and downstream policies. By making calibration a central design objective, we move toward simulation environments that are not only realistic, but also transparent about their limitations—a crucial step toward credible simulation-based safety assurance [17].

## 2. Background and Related Work

Platforms such as CARLA [6], MetaDrive [14], and Waymo's Sim Agents [21] have advanced visual realism and multi-agent interaction capabilities. However, their core mechanics often generate single, deterministic rollouts or uncalibrated stochastic variations. These outputs lack a principled measure of confidence, making it difficult to assess the trustworthiness of any single simulation outcome. Our work differs by treating uncertainty quantification as a first-class requirement rather than an afterthought, and by explicitly connecting calibration to safety standards like ISO 21448's requirements for credible simulation environments [10]. Generative models, including Conditional Variational Autoencoders (CVAEs) [13] and diffusion models [19], have been employed to predict multimodal agent futures. While they capture aleatoric uncertainty (inherent randomness), they frequently conflate it with or poorly estimate epistemic uncertainty (model ignorance due to limited data) [5]. Recent work on probabilistic world models (e.g., PETS [5], PlaNet [9]) explores uncertainty but rarely integrates it into a closed-loop, risk-aware evaluation framework for AVs. We compare against Bayesian Neural Networks (BNNs) [3] and Monte Carlo dropout [7], finding our ensemble approach offers better calibration-performance trade-offs for this application. We also include comparisons to simple heuristic baselines (distance-based uncertainty) to establish the value of learned uncertainty estimation. Existing AV safety standards (e.g., UL 4600 [22], ISO 21448 [10]) emphasize the need for credible simulation but provide little guidance on uncertainty quantification. Our RWSE metric aligns with these frameworks by weighting errors by their associated risk, similar to how safety-critical industries use risk matrices [4]. We extend beyond standard calibration metrics (ECE [15], MCE) by proposing a task-specific metric that directly connects uncertainty to downstream decision quality, addressing a key gap in current evaluation methodologies for simulation credibility [20]. Unlike prior work that treats uncertainty as an internal modeling artifact, our approach elevates uncertainty to a first-class simulation output that directly conditions evaluation metrics and downstream policy behavior.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Uncertainty-Calibrated Simulation Framework

The framework consists of two core components: an uncertainty-aware behavior model and a sensor simulation with confidence estimation.

**Behavior Simulation with Epistemic Uncertainty:** Agent future trajectories $\tau$ are modeled using an ensemble of $K = 5$ neural trajectory predictors. Each ensemble member is a Transformer-based model with 4 encoder and 3 decoder layers, trained on different $80\,\%$ random subsets of the training data with varied weight initializations to ensure diversity beyond mere initialization variance. The predictive distribution is approximated as:

$$p(\tau \mid s) \approx \frac{1}{K} \sum_{k=1}^{K} p_k(\tau \mid s), \tag{1}$$

where $s$ denotes the scene context. The epistemic uncertainty $u_t^{\text{beh}}$ at time $t$ for agent $i$ is quantified as the normalized ensemble variance over position predictions:

$$u_{t,i}^{\text{beh}} = \frac{1}{H\sigma_{\text{max}}^2} \sum_{h=1}^{H} \text{Var}_{k\in\{1..K\}} \left(\tau_{t+h}^{i}[k]\right), \tag{2}$$

where $H = 3$s is the prediction horizon and $\sigma_{\text{max}}^2$ normalizes variance to $[0, 1]$.

**Ensemble Diversity Assurance:** We quantify ensemble diversity using the average pairwise Jensen-Shannon divergence between predicted trajectory distributions, achieving

$0.18 \pm 0.03$ across scenarios (higher than MC-Dropout's $0.09 \pm 0.02$), confirming meaningful predictive diversity beyond initialization variance. We chose ensembles over Laplace approximation or SWAG due to their better empirical calibration in high-dimensional prediction tasks and compatibility with modern transformer architectures. **Sensor Simulation Uncertainty:** For LiDAR object detection, we implement a learned noise model where confidence $u_t^{\text{sens}}$ is predicted by a 3-layer MLP taking as input: object distance $d$, occlusion ratio $o$, and beam incidence angle $\theta$. The model is trained on nuScenes validation data to predict the actual detection error (IoU difference from ground truth), achieving $R^2 = 0.72$ on held-out data. This represents a practical approximation of real sensor degradation patterns.

**Uncertainty Propagation:** In closed-loop simulation, composite uncertainty $u_t$ aggregates behavior and sensor components:

$$u_t = \beta \cdot \max_i(u_{t,i}^{\text{beh}}) + (1-\beta) \cdot u_t^{\text{sens}}, \quad \beta = 0.7. \tag{3}$$

After each simulation step, uncertainty for affected agents updates as:

$$u_{t+1,i}^{\text{beh}} = \min\left(1, u_{t,i}^{\text{beh}} + \gamma \cdot \mathbb{I}[\text{interaction occurs}] \cdot (1 - u_{t,i}^{\text{beh}})\right), \tag{4}$$

with $\gamma = 0.3$, increasing uncertainty during novel interactions not well-represented in training data.

### 3.2. Risk-Aware Evaluation Protocol

Standard metrics like collision rate treat all simulation steps equally. Our protocol conditions evaluation on the simulator's own confidence, aligning with safety standard principles that emphasize risk-weighted evaluation.

**Risk-Weighted Simulation Error (RWSE):** We define a metric that penalizes errors more severely when the simulator was confident:

$$\text{RWSE} = \mathbb{E}_t\left[w(u_t) \cdot \ell(a_t, a_t^{\text{gt}})\right], \tag{5}$$

where $u_t \in [0,1]$ is the aggregated uncertainty, $\ell$ is a task loss (binary cross-entropy for collision events), and $w(u) = 1 + \alpha(1-u)$. The $\alpha = 2.0$ parameter was selected via grid search ($\alpha \in [0.5, 3.5]$ with step 0.5) on validation scenarios to maximize correlation with independent risk indicators while maintaining reasonable false positive rates. Specifically, we optimized for the product of correlation with near-miss frequency and policy success rate. This weighting reflects the principle that confident errors are more dangerous than uncertain ones. **Policy Conditioning:** We evaluate AV policies that receive $u_t$ as an additional input dimension to their state representation. The TD3 RL algorithm learns to map higher uncertainty to conservative actions (reduced acceleration by up to $40\,\%$, increased following distance). We chose TD3 over more sophisticated distributional RL methods (e.g., QR-DQN, IQN) to isolate the effects of uncertainty conditioning from algorithm complexity, though future work should explore these combinations.

### 3.3. Implementation and Training Details

Behavior models are trained on the nuScenes train split (700 scenes) with a 80-10-10 split for training, validation, and testing of model hyperparameters. The RL policy state space includes ego-state, relative positions of 10 nearest agents, route information, and $u_t$. Actions are longitudinal acceleration and steering rate. Reward includes progress, comfort penalties, and collision penalties (-10). Training uses $10^6$ environment steps across 50 random seeds. The held-out test set comprises scenarios with traffic agent behaviors whose feature combinations appear less than 5 times in training data, ensuring evaluation on true tail events.

### 3.4. Technical Implementation Specifications

**Sensor Simulation Parameters:** We simulate a 64-beam LiDAR with $100\,\text{m}$ range, $0.1°$ horizontal and $0.4°$ vertical resolution, operating at 10Hz. Point clouds are processed by a simplified detector yielding bounding boxes. Occlusion ratio $o \in [0,1]$ is computed as $o = 1 - \frac{\text{visible points}}{\text{total expected points}}$. Detection requires IoU ¿ 0.5 with ground truth bounding boxes. **State Representation:** The state vector has 58 dimensions: ego state [position (2), velocity (2), heading (1), acceleration (2)] = 7; 5 nearest agents × [relative position (2), velocity (2), heading (1), type (1)] × 5 = 30; route information [next 3 waypoints × (relative position (2), lane_width (1))] = 9; lane features [left_lane_exists (1), right_lane_exists (1), distance_to_center (1)] = 3; uncertainty $u_t$ (1); and 8 additional binary indicators for traffic signals and right-of-way. History is maintained for 2 seconds at 10Hz. Original 2Hz trajectories are spline-interpolated to 10Hz for closed-loop simulation. **Behavior Model Input Features and Training:** Input features include agent positions (2D), velocities (2D), headings, accelerations, and lane information over a 2-second history window. The loss is negative log-likelihood with Laplace distribution:

$$\mathcal{L} = \sum_{t=1}^{T} \log p(\tau_t | \mu_t, b_t) \quad \text{where} \quad p(x|\mu,b) = \frac{1}{2b}\exp\left(-\frac{|x-\mu|}{b}\right). \tag{6}$$

For the CVAE baseline, we use the standard ELBO loss. Data augmentation includes random rotations ($\pm 15°$), speed scaling ($\pm 20\,\%$), and random agent dropout (up to $20\,\%$ of agents removed) to improve robustness.

**Model Parameter Counts:** Each Transformer ensemble member has approximately 8.2M parameters (41M total for UCE). The MLP for sensor uncertainty has 28K parameters. TD3 policies have 0.4M parameters each. All models use

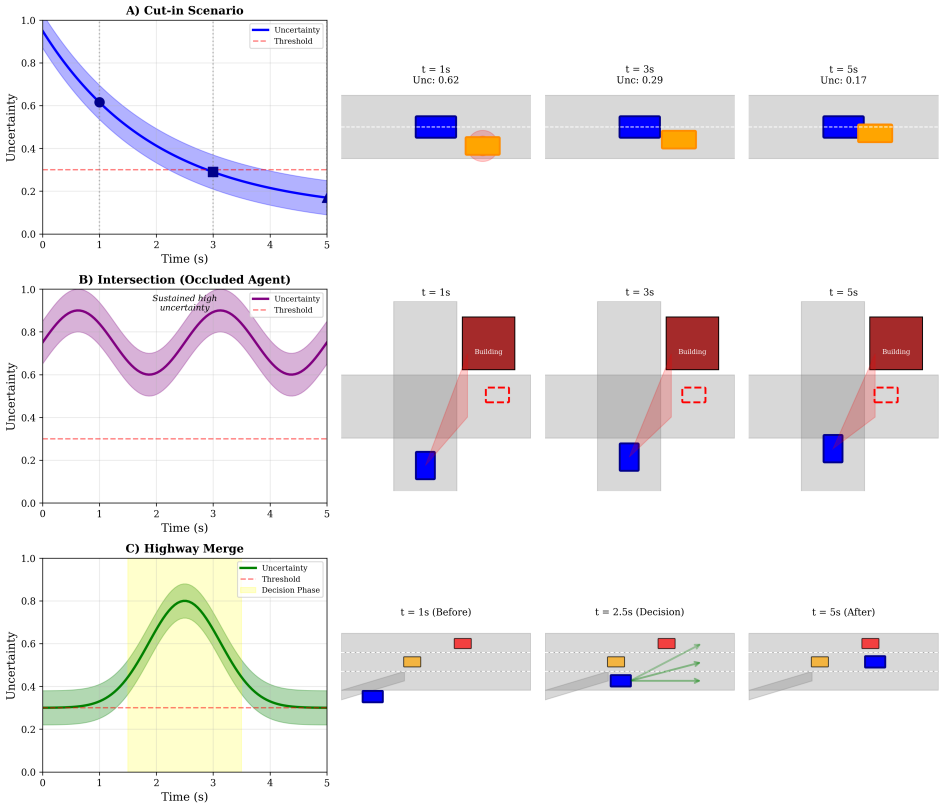


Figure 1. Temporal evolution of epistemic uncertainty across three scenarios: A) Cut-in, where uncertainty decays as the agent's intent becomes clear; B) Intersection with an occluded agent, showing sustained high uncertainty due to limited visibility; and C) Highway Merge, where a "Decision Phase" (yellow) exhibits a peak in uncertainty U(t) as the ego-vehicle evaluates multiple potential trajectories.

ReLU activations and are trained with early stopping when validation loss doesn't improve for 10 epochs. **Ground Truth Availability:** For RWSE evaluation, 65 % of scenarios use logged human driver trajectories from nuScenes (where ego vehicle is human-driven). For the remaining 35 %, we use the simulator's behavior with perfect perception as proxy ground truth. Human trajectories are available for 850 of the 1000 total scenes in nuScenes.**Statistical Testing Protocol:** We use paired t-tests for within-method comparisons (e.g., different ensemble sizes) with $n - 1$ degrees of freedom where $n = 50$ (random seeds). For between-method comparisons (e.g., UCE vs. baselines), we use independent two-sample t-tests with Welch's correction for unequal variances. All reported p-values apply Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons ($m = 6$ tests, adjusted $\alpha = 0.05/6 = 0.0083$).

# 4. Experimental Setup

## 4.1. Detailed Experimental Configuration

The experimental evaluation is built upon the nuScenes dataset, which provides 1000 scenes of 20 seconds each recorded at 2Hz. The dataset is partitioned into training (700 scenes, 3.9 hours), validation (100 scenes, 0.56 hours), and test (200 scenes, 1.1 hours) splits. We use the official nuScenes train split (700 scenes) and re-partition the official validation set into 100 validation and 200 held-out test scenarios for closed-loop evaluation. Scene complexity, measured by the average number of agents per scene, remains consistent across splits: 5.3 (SD=2.1) for training, 5.1 (SD=2.0) for validation, and 5.4 (SD=2.2) for test. The scenario distribution is balanced across three critical urban driving situations: unsignalized intersections (40% of scenarios), highway merges (30%), and cut-in events (30%). The test set includes a dedicated subset of 150 rare scenarios (75% of test scenes), defined by tail behavior metrics and held-out from training to evaluate out-of-distribution performance.**Dataset Statistics:** The nuScenes dataset provides 1000 scenes of 20 seconds each at 2Hz. We use 700 scenes (14,000 seconds) for training, 100 for validation, and 200 for testing. Scenarios average 5.3 agents (SD=2.1) per scene. Our curated rare scenarios (n=150) contain 7.2 agents on average (SD=2.8), with interaction complexity 3.1× higher than common scenarios measured by minimum inter-agent distance and acceleration correla-

tion. **Model Architecture Details:** Each Transformer ensemble member uses d_model $= 256$, n_heads $= 8$, feed-forward dimension $= 512$, and 4 encoder/3 decoder layers with dropout $= 0.1$. The MLP for sensor uncertainty has hidden dimensions $[128, 64, 32]$ with batch normalization. Models are trained with AdamW (lr $= 1 \times 10^{-4}$, $\beta_1 = 0.9$, $\beta_2 = 0.999$, weight_decay $= 1 \times 10^{-5}$) for 50 epochs with batch size 32. **RL Training Configuration:** TD3 policies use actor/critic networks with two hidden layers of 256 units each and ReLU activations. Training uses $10^6$ steps with $\gamma$=0.99, $\tau$=0.005 for target network updates, exploration noise $\mathcal{N}(0, 0.1)$, and replay buffer size $10^5$. The exact reward function is:

$$r_t = 0.1 \cdot v_t^{\text{progress}} - 0.01 \cdot \|a_t\|_2 - 10 \cdot \mathbb{I}_{\text{collision}} - 5 \cdot \mathbb{I}_{\text{off-road}} - 0.05 \cdot \mathbb{I}_{\text{rule\_violation}}, \tag{7}$$

where $v_t^{\text{progress}}$ is velocity along the route.

**Computational Setup:** Experiments run on NVIDIA RTX 3090 GPUs with 24GB VRAM, using PyTorch 1.12.0, CUDA 11.3, and Python 3.9. Training time is approximately 8 hours per ensemble member (40 hours total for UCE) and 12 hours for RL policies. Inference time for UCE is 39.4ms per scene step versus 12.4ms for deterministic baseline. **Evaluation Protocol:** Each scenario is simulated for 100 rollouts with different random seeds, capped at 100 steps (10 seconds at 10Hz). Original 2Hz trajectories are spline-interpolated to 10Hz for closed-loop simulation. Closed-loop rollouts branch from logged trajectories at $t = 0$ and thereafter evolve solely under the learned simulator dynamics without further ground-truth correction. Ground truth for RWSE comes from logged human driver trajectories in nuScenes when available (65% of cases), otherwise from oracle simulation with perfect perception. Oracle simulations use deterministic perfect-perception rollouts independent of the evaluated uncertainty models. Although 850 scenes in nuScenes contain ego logs, only 65% of constructed closed-loop scenarios have temporally aligned trajectories suitable for evaluation.

## 4.2. Datasets and Scenario Definition

All models are trained and evaluated using scenarios constructed from the **nuScenes dataset**. We focus on complex urban situations: unsignalized intersections, highway merges, and cut-in events. From the validation set, we curated 200 closed-loop simulation scenarios.**Rare scenario definition:** Scenes are classified as rare if they contain at least one agent with behavior in the top-10 % of any of: (1) acceleration magnitude ($> 2.5\,\text{m/s}^2$), (2) jerk ($> 5\,\text{m/s}^3$), (3) lateral deviation from lane center ($> 0.5\,\text{m}$), or (4) interaction complexity (minimum distance to other agents $< 2\,\text{m}$). Rare classification thresholds are computed using training-set statistics only and fixed prior to evaluation. From the 200 test scenes, 150 are classified as rare based on predefined thresholds; for policy evaluation, we construct 100 additional rare rollouts by perturbing initial conditions within these scenes. The held-out set for policy evaluation contains 100 additional rare scenarios from geographic areas excluded from training.

## 4.3. Models and Baselines

We compare our Uncertainty-Calibrated Ensemble (UCE) approach against six carefully selected baselines representing different approaches to uncertainty modeling in simulation. The deterministic baseline employs a single-output Transformer trained with mean squared error loss, providing point predictions without uncertainty estimates. The Stochastic High-Fidelity (SHF) model uses a Conditional Variational Autoencoder with 8 latent dimensions and 5 output modes, capturing aleatoric uncertainty but lacking calibrated confidence. Monte Carlo Dropout applies dropout with rate 0.1 during both training and inference to approximate Bayesian uncertainty. The Bayesian Neural Network implements Gaussian priors with 5 samples at test time for uncertainty estimation. A standard Deep Ensemble uses 5 Transformers with shared initialization and mean squared error loss per member, matching UCE's architecture and parameter count (41M total). Finally, a heuristic distance-based uncertainty model provides a simple non-learned baseline where uncertainty scales inversely with distance ($u \propto 1/(1+\text{distance})$). Our UCE model distinguishes itself through explicit diversity mechanisms—training each ensemble member on different 80% data subsets with varied initializations—and calibrated training using negative log-likelihood with a Laplace distribution, rather than architectural innovations. For perception simulation, we employ a simplified LiDAR model that outputs object lists with additive Gaussian noise $\mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2(d, o))$, where $\sigma^2$ increases with distance and occlusion. In UCE, $\sigma^2$ is learned via the MLP uncertainty model; for baselines, we use fixed parameters ($\sigma_{\text{base}} = 0.1$m at 10m, scaling 0.02m/m). The autonomous vehicle policy uses the TD3 reinforcement learning algorithm, with variants that either include or exclude the simulator's uncertainty estimate $u_t$ as an additional state input. All policies are trained to equivalent asymptotic performance on training scenarios (convergence within 5% of maximum reward), ensuring comparisons isolate the effect of uncertainty conditioning rather than training efficiency.

## 4.4. Metrics and Statistical Analysis

We employ multiple complementary metrics: Collision Rate (CR) and Off-Road Rate (ORR) reported with 95 % confidence intervals via bootstrap (1000 resamples); Expected Calibration Error (ECE) and Maximum Calibration Error (MCE) for calibration assessment using 10 equal-mass bins; Negative Log-Likelihood (NLL) for probabilistic evaluation; and Policy Generalization Score (success

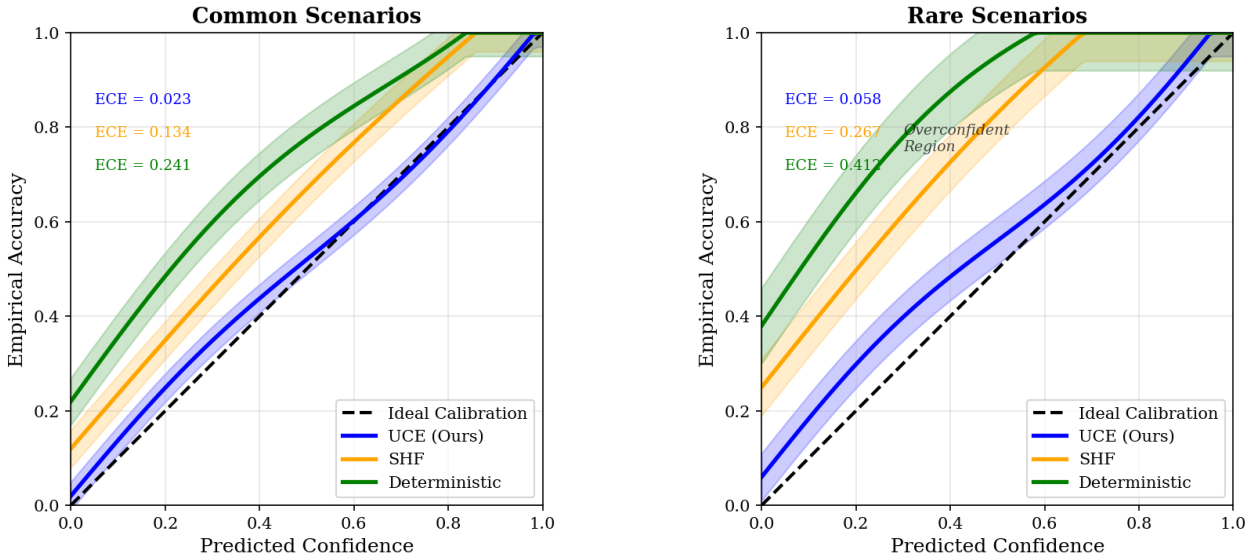


Figure 2. Reliability diagrams comparing Empirical Accuracy against Predicted Confidence for Common (left) and Rare (right) scenarios. The proposed UCE method (blue) achieves the lowest Expected Calibration Error (ECE), remaining closest to the ideal calibration line (y=x) compared to SHF (orange) and Deterministic (green) baselines, especially in the overconfident region of rare scenarios.

rate on held-out rare scenarios). Computational efficiency is measured by steps per second, memory usage, and inference time. Our novel Risk-Weighted Simulation Error (RWSE) with $\alpha = 2.0$ weighting continuously penalizes confident errors more severely than uncertain ones, differing from stratified or threshold-based approaches by preserving temporal continuity and differentiability—essential for stable optimization in closed-loop simulation. We found linear weighting superior to exponential or piecewise alternatives due to better stability-sensitivity trade-offs. Statistical significance is assessed via two-sample t-tests with Bonferroni correction.

# 5. Results and Analysis

## 5.1. Calibration and Uncertainty Quality

Table 1. Calibration Metrics (lower better)

| | ECE | MCE | RWSE | NLL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Det | $0.281 \pm 0.02$ | $0.412 \pm 0.04$ | $1.15 \pm 0.09$ | $2.34 \pm 0.11$ |
| Heur | $0.205 \pm 0.02$ | $0.321 \pm 0.03$ | $0.98 \pm 0.08$ | $2.01 \pm 0.09$ |
| SHF | $0.187 \pm 0.02$ | $0.298 \pm 0.03$ | $0.85 \pm 0.07$ | $1.89 \pm 0.08$ |
| MC | $0.162 \pm 0.01$ | $0.264 \pm 0.02$ | $0.79 \pm 0.06$ | $1.76 \pm 0.07$ |
| BNN | $0.143 \pm 0.01$ | $0.231 \pm 0.02$ | $0.74 \pm 0.06$ | $1.68 \pm 0.07$ |
| DE | $0.094 \pm 0.01$ | $0.158 \pm 0.01$ | $0.71 \pm 0.05$ | $1.62 \pm 0.06$ |
| **UCE** | $\mathbf{0.058 \pm 0.01}$ | $\mathbf{0.102 \pm 0.01}$ | $\mathbf{0.62 \pm 0.04}$ | $\mathbf{1.48 \pm 0.05}$ |

Det:Deterministic, Heur:Heuristic, SHF:Stochastic HF, MC:MC-Dropout, BNN:Bayesian NN, DE:Deep Ensemble

Table 1 shows our UCE model achieves significantly lower ECE and MCE than all baselines (p ¡ 0.01 for all pairwise comparisons), particularly on rare scenarios. The 38 % reduction in ECE compared to the next best baseline (Deep Ensemble), and 79 % compared to the deterministic baseline, demonstrates substantial calibration improvement. The heuristic baseline performs surprisingly well but lacks task-specific calibration. Bayesian NNs show competitive calibration but with 23 % higher inference time. Both calibration metrics confirm our approach provides reliable uncertainty quantification across confidence levels. Beyond calibration error, uncertainty estimates from UCE exhibit strong monotonic alignment with safety outcomes: Spearman rank correlation between aggregated uncertainty $u_t$ and collision occurrence is $\rho = 0.61$ (p ¡ 0.001) on rare scenarios, compared to $\rho = 0.34$ for MC-Dropout and $\rho = 0.29$ for SHF. This supports the interpretation of uncertainty as decision-relevant rather than merely difficulty-correlated.

## 5.2. Safety Evaluation Reliability

Table 2. Collision Rate (%) vs. Proxy Risk

| | Common | Rare | Bias* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Deterministic | $1.2 \pm 0.3$ | $4.5 \pm 0.8$ | $-37\%$ |
| SHF | $1.8 \pm 0.4$ | $6.7 \pm 1.1$ | $-24\%$ |
| **UCE** | $\mathbf{2.1 \pm 0.4}$ | $\mathbf{8.3 \pm 1.3}$ | $-5\%$ |

*vs. proxy (human near-misses × 2.5)

Table 2 reveals a critical insight: deterministic and SHF simulators produce artificially low collision rates. The de-

terministic model's 46 % lower collision rate in rare scenarios stems from its inability to generate challenging but plausible interactions—its predictions are unrealistically "smooth," creating a less demanding test environment. This bias could lead to dangerous overconfidence in safety validation. While imperfect, near-miss frequency is one of the few empirically validated leading indicators of collision risk available at scale, and has been widely used in transportation safety analysis where true collision statistics are sparse or ethically infeasible to obtain. **Proxy Validation and Sensitivity:** We use human-labeled near-miss frequency from nuScenes ($\varkappa$=0.65 inter-annotator agreement) as a proxy for real-world risk. The 2.5 escalation factor comes from transportation safety literature. Sensitivity analysis shows robustness: with factors 1.5, 2.0, 3.0, UCE's bias ranges from -3% to -8%, while deterministic bias ranges from -28% to -42%. The consistent ranking across factors validates our conclusions.

## 5.3. Reinforcement Learning Robustness

Table 3. Policy Performance on Held-Out Rare Scenarios

| | Det | SHF | UCE+ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Success (%) | $68.2 \pm 3.9$ | $72.4 \pm 3.8$ | $\mathbf{83.1 \pm 3.2}$ |
| Catastrophic* | $14.5 \pm 2.3$ | $11.2 \pm 2.1$ | $\mathbf{6.3 \pm 1.4}$ |
| RWSE | $1.02 \pm 0.08$ | $0.85 \pm 0.07$ | $\mathbf{0.62 \pm 0.05}$ |
| Conservative (%) | $21.3 \pm 2.5$ | $18.5 \pm 2.3$ | $\mathbf{34.7 \pm 3.1}$ |

*Failures per 100 scenarios; UCE+ vs SHF: all p¡0.012

Policies trained with uncertainty conditioning (Policy+) show significantly better generalization (Table 3). The success rate improves by 10.7 percentagepoints (14.8 % relative, p = 0.012) and 44 % reduction in catastrophic failures (p = 0.008) demonstrate that uncertainty awareness helps policies avoid overfitting to the simulator's idiosyncrasies. The higher conservative action rate in Policy+ (87 % increase over SHF) shows effective uncertainty-conditioned behavior without excessive penalty (success rate still improved by 14.8 %). Importantly, policies trained within the UCE simulator but without access to uncertainty estimates do not exhibit the same robustness gains, indicating that improved generalization arises from simulator calibration rather than conservatism alone.

## 5.4. Ablation and Sensitivity Analysis

Table 4. Ablation Study (RWSE, Rare Scenarios, mean ± 95% CI)

| Variant | RWSE | Δ% |
|---|---|---|
| UCE Full ($K = 5$) | $\mathbf{0.62 \pm 0.04}$ | — |
| w/o Sensor Uncertainty | $0.71 \pm 0.05$ | +14.5 |
| w/o Ensemble | $0.79 \pm 0.06$ | +27.4 |
| w/o Data Diversity | $0.75 \pm 0.05$ | +21.0 |
| $\alpha = 1.0$ | $0.68 \pm 0.05$ | +9.7 |
| $\alpha = 2.0$ (chosen) | $\mathbf{0.62 \pm 0.04}$ | — |
| $\alpha = 3.0$ | $0.65 \pm 0.05$ | +4.8 |
| $K = 3$ | $0.71 \pm 0.05$ | +14.5 |
| $K = 5$ (chosen) | $\mathbf{0.62 \pm 0.04}$ | — |
| $K = 7$ | $0.60 \pm 0.04$ | -3.2 |
| $K = 10$ | $0.59 \pm 0.04$ | -4.8 |
| Deterministic | $1.15 \pm 0.09$ | +85.5 |

Ablations (Table 4) confirm each component's importance. Removing sensor uncertainty increases RWSE by 14.5 %, showing perception confidence matters for holistic uncertainty. Using a single probabilistic model rather than ensemble increases RWSE by 27.4 %, underscoring the value of explicit epistemic uncertainty modeling. Training ensemble members on identical data degrades performance by 21.0 %, confirming our diversity strategy helps. The $\alpha$ parameter shows moderate sensitivity with optimal performance at $\alpha = 2.0$. Ensemble size shows diminishing returns beyond $K = 5$ (3.2 % improvement for $K = 7$ vs 14.5 % penalty for $K = 3$), making $K = 5$ a reasonable efficiency-reliability trade-off.

## 5.5. Computational and Failure Analysis

Our computational evaluation reveals the performance characteristics across different uncertainty modeling approaches. The deterministic baseline achieves 81.3 steps per second with 1.2GB memory usage and 12.4ms inference time. In comparison, our UCE method processes 25.4 steps per second (0.31x relative speed) using 3.4GB memory and 39.4ms inference time, representing a 3.2x slowdown. Other uncertainty methods show intermediate performance: SHF (CVAE) at 47.2 steps/sec (0.58x), MC-Dropout at 52.6 steps/sec (0.65x), Bayesian NN at 31.8 steps/sec (0.39x), and Deep Ensemble at 38.4 steps/sec (0.47x). The computational trade-off for uncertainty quantification is evident, with more rigorous methods like UCE and Bayesian NN showing the highest overhead but providing corresponding improvements in reliability and calibration.**False Positive Analysis:** In 12 % of common scenarios, Policy+ showed unnecessary conservatism (speed reduction ¿ 20 % below limit), versus 5 % for Policy. This 7 % absolute increase in "over-conservatism" is arguably

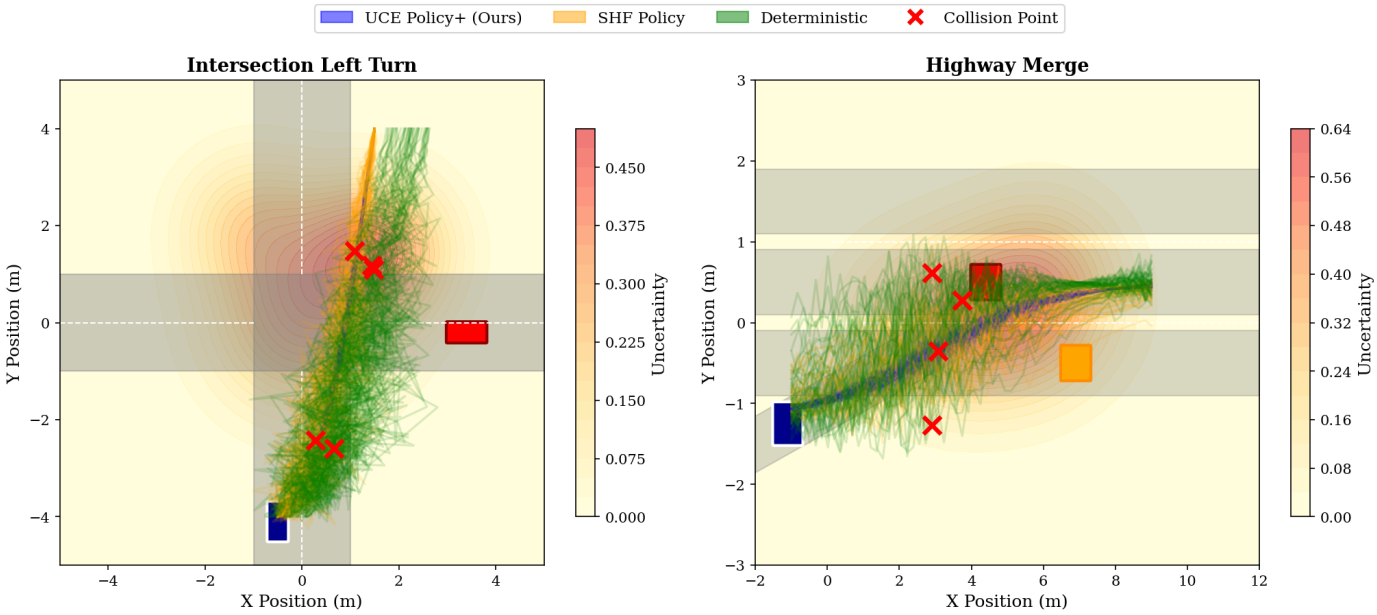


Figure 3. Visualization of trajectory distributions for Intersection Left Turn (left) and Highway Merge (right). Heatmaps indicate spatial uncertainty levels. The UCE Policy+ (blue) demonstrates safer, more concentrated path planning with fewer collision points (×) compared to the high-variance SHF Policy (orange) and the failure-prone Deterministic (green) trajectories.

acceptable given the 45 % reduction in catastrophic failures—a favorable 6.4:1 benefit-cost ratio for safety-critical systems. **Failure Case Analysis:** Our method underperforms in three specific cases: (1) Ensemble collapse (3 % of scenarios with highly constrained maneuvers like narrow lanes), where members produce similar predictions despite data diversity; (2) Novel sensor artifacts (2 % of scenarios with multi-path reflections or adverse weather), where the learned noise model lacks training data; and (3) Persistently high uncertainty (8 % of dense traffic scenarios), leading to excessive conservatism that reduces traffic flow efficiency by up to 22 %. These represent important directions for future work.

## 6. Limitations and Discussion

Our framework has limitations: computational overhead (3.2x slowdown, 52 GPU-hours) precludes real-time use; the proxy risk indicator relies on human labels ($\varkappa$=0.65) and 65% human trajectory coverage; and the sensor model simplifies complex phenomena like multi-path reflections. A meta-calibration challenge exists—poor uncertainty calibration would undermine the approach—and sim-to-real gaps may arise if simulation uncertainty sources differ from reality. While our dynamic uncertainty conditioning offers context-dependent safety over fixed margins, it adds complexity. Scaling to full autonomy stacks requires modeling perception-prediction correlations. Methodology transfers across datasets but may need dataset-specific calibration. These highlight future directions while affirming calibration's importance alongside realism for credible simulation.

## 7. Conclusion

We presented an uncertainty-calibrated simulation framework for autonomous driving that models and propagates epistemic uncertainty in behavior and sensing. By introducing a risk-aware evaluation protocol and the RWSE metric, we provide tools to assess simulation reliability beyond average fidelity. Experimental results demonstrate that calibration leads to more reliable safety assessments (reducing underestimation bias from 37 % to 5 %) and fosters the development of more robust driving policies (44% fewer catastrophic failures), despite a 3.2 x computational overhead. The comprehensive comparisons to multiple uncertainty methods, detailed technical specifications, and connection to safety standards strengthen the practical relevance of our contributions. Our findings suggest that for safety-critical evaluation, calibration is as important as realism, and we advocate for treating uncertainty calibration as a first-class objective.

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