Certainty in Knowledge: a Cartesian Complication

René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* represents a watershed moment in the history of epistemology. However, for as influential as Descartes intended the work to be, the *Meditations* raise cause for serious skeptical concern. This essay concerns itself with arguing that Descartes’ assertion that certainty is an essential feature of knowledge provides intuitive reasons to doubt it as well as profound skeptical consequences. The following elaboration of this argument will first examine the *Meditations*’ historical context and how it relates to Descartes’ need for certainty in knowledge. Then, Descartes’ indirect route to establishing the certainty principle is examined. Finally, the implications of Descartes’ arguments are examined after exploring the foundations for the Cartesian Circle.

In order to examine certainty’s role in the *Meditations*, the work’s context must be first be explored. At the time of the *Meditations* writing (1641), the dominant Scholastic worldview was meeting heavy resistance from the rising tide of the more rational view of the modern sciences. Explanations for worldly functions were becoming increasingly reliant on mathematical and geometric support. It was beginning to become clear that Scholastic empiricism was providing an inadequate foundation for knowledge – and here is where Descartes found his purpose in writing the *Meditations*. Descartes’ *Meditations* work toward casting doubt onto and undermining the Scholastic worldview while supplying an undoubtable foundation for a rational worldview. In order to achieve such a feat, Descartes employs his Method of Doubt. The Method of Doubt seeks to continually cast doubt on key aspects of prior
beliefs until an undoubtable, *certain*, foundation is established. And for Descartes, having certainty as an aspect of knowledge is of the utmost importance. To convince Scholastics that their entire worldview is flawed, Descartes carries the burden of supplying a worldview that is immune from reasonable doubt. If certainty in his foundation cannot be established, Descartes’ entire mission has failed.

Descartes’ assertion that certainty is an essential property of knowledge is established early in the *Meditations*, albeit indirectly and as the result of several key steps. First, Descartes equates uncertainty with falsity - “I should withhold my assent no less carefully from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable than I would from those that are patently false.” (pg. 59, p. 18). He establishes that in order to advance in his task of building a sound foundation for knowledge, he must treat opinions that lack certainty as if they are false. It also seems to follow that here Descartes highlights that he is inherently trusting that which is certain. Descartes quickly follows by highlighting reasonable doubt’s importance in this process - “It will suffice for the rejection of all of these opinions, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt” (pg. 59, p.18).

At this point, it is important to understand how Descartes views doubt’s relationship to certainty. Doubt, to Descartes, lies in contrast to certainty. The less one doubts something, the more they are certain of it; the obvious converse being, the more one doubts something the less certain they are of it. So, it follows that Descartes’ definition of perfect certainty is essentially the complete absence of reasonable doubt. It also follows that the opposite is true to Descartes – the essence of uncertainty is the presence of reasonable doubt. By virtue of these premises, Descartes has asserted that if one harbors any doubt about something, their uncertainty shows that it is false. Conversely, if one’s knowledge is immune to reasonable doubt, one can be certain about it
and trust that it is true. However indirectly it was stated, Descartes asserts that certainty is a requirement for knowledge to be true.

It has been established that for Descartes, certain knowledge is the only knowledge that one can trust. To lay the foundation for this principle, Descartes calls upon his clear and distinct perceptions. By the end of Meditation I, Descartes has supplied two doubts that are so convincing he supposes that “everything I see is false” (pg. 63, p. 24). While he does not stand by this claim as the Meditations continue, the two doubts called Descartes’ reality into question quite effectively, to the point at which Descartes actively doubts his own existence. After much introspection into the nature of his own reality, Descartes arrives at the conclusion that “I am certain that I am a thinking thing” (pg. 70, p. 35). He then follows: “But do I not therefore also know what is required for me to be certain of anything? Surely … there is nothing but a certain clear and distinct perception of what I affirm. Yet this would hardly be enough to render me certain of the truth of a thing, if it could ever happen that something that I perceived so clearly and distinctly were false. And thus, I now seem able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (pg. 70, p. 35). It is apparent in this quotation that Descartes attributes complete trust to his clear and distinct perceptions.

Descartes’ world is one full of doubt, so this apparent title of immunity to doubt is a standard high enough to border exclusivity. A standard this high naturally begets questions of the trustworthiness of said perceptions. In order to address these concerns, Descartes synthesizes two premises. The first: it is the nature of clear and distinct perceptions to be irresistibly believed. The second: God exists, and “deception is incompatible with God” (pg. 81, p 53). From these two premises Descartes arrives at the conclusion that God’s status as omni-benevolent assures the certainty and accompanying truth of one’s clear and distinct perceptions. Clear and distinct perceptions are to be irresistibly believed. If one’s clear and distinct perceptions were false, one
would be compelled to believe the perception regardless, and God would be a deceiver. Yet, because deception is incompatible with God, there is no possibility that one’s clear and distinct perceptions could be a deception. For Descartes, God’s existence and status as incompatible with deception assures the trustworthiness of clear and distinct perceptions.

The implications of such an argument are far reaching and damning for Descartes’ project as a whole. But in order to understand these implications, one must first explore the Cartesian Circle itself. Early in Meditation III, Descartes posits the rule that one can trust their clear and distinct perceptions, citing God’s existence as a benevolent being incapable of deception as support. As Descartes continues in Meditation III, he relies on a scale of reality to build his case for the existence of God. While the idea of the scale itself provides no problems, Descartes states “the longer and more attentively I examine all these points, the more clearly and distinctly I know they are true” (pg. 74, p. 42). Herein lies the circularity of Descartes’ argument. Descartes’ justification for the validity of clear and distinct perceptions relies on the premise that God exists and is a non-deceiver. Simultaneously, Descartes utilizes clear and distinct perceptions when arguing for God’s existence, essentially presupposing the reliability of one’s clear and distinct perceptions. Serious skeptical concerns arise from the Cartesian Circle. The certainty principle relies heavily on the ability to trust one’s clear and distinct perceptions, and if one’s ability to trust said perceptions is based on circular reasoning, then Descartes’ entire foundation for certainty is illogical and not admissible. In short, Descartes effectively forces himself to non-circularly justify the reliability of his rational faculties. One can’t do this; to attempt to support the reliability of one’s rational faculties requires the use of those very same faculties. It seems to follow that Descartes’ requirement of certainty actually makes him more susceptible to the threat of skepticism.
Not only is the requirement of certainty cause for skeptical concern, the assertion that certainty is an essential, necessary feature of true knowledge collides with common sense rather easily. Consider the following: I know that when I am at Indiana University, I live in Teter Quad. I know that I was born at Northside Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia. I know that my birthday is the 21st of August. Does there not exist the possibility that all of these ideas which I consider among my most certain knowledge are false? Residential services could have terminated my contract moments ago without me being aware of such an action. I could return to what I thought was my dorm and find my belongings moved to my actual dorm in Forrest Quad. Regarding my knowledge that I was born in Atlanta on the 21st – is there not the possibility that my parents have deceived me of this for 19 years? My birth certificate could be false, and the corroborating stories of family members could be coerced lies. Therefore, it seems that everything we know to be true coexists with the possibility for falsity - the evidence for our most secure beliefs seems consistent with the falsity of those beliefs. We operate under this assumption daily; it appears that we intuitively acknowledge that certainty is not an essential feature of knowledge.

In the *Meditations*, René Descartes gives no reasons to accept certainty as a necessary feature for knowledge. Not only does it appear commonsensical to think otherwise, this requirement has profound skeptical consequences. This exploration of the certainty principle shows that the Cartesian Circle raises a philosophical concern that strikes deep to the core of the epistemological school of thought. It appears as though one cannot prove the reliability of their rational faculties without using said faculties. This may doom one to forever exist as a skeptic - unable to attest to the validity of their own knowledge. The *Meditations* was a work meant to provide a framework for knowledge immune to the threat of reasonable doubt. However, it may be the case that, in trying to determine the perfect method for gathering knowledge, Descartes actually casted doubt on one’s ability to ever trust or gain knowledge again.
Works Cited

Descartes, Rene and Cress, Donald. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy.*