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THE CARTESIAN REVOLUTION

A Study of Descartes' Meditations

by

Erica Lucy Roberts

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the Australian National University, July 1991

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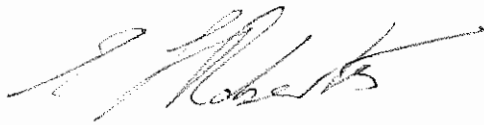
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Declaration

This thesis is my own work. All sources used have been acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Erica Roberts', written in dark ink.

Erica Lucy Roberts

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ABSTRACT

In this study I focus on Descartes' *Meditations* and aim to show its revolutionary importance in the history of philosophy. I argue that its significance cannot be understood by abstracting it from its historical context, nor by regarding the pre-Cartesian Christian medieval period as devoid of systematic philosophy or science. To the contrary, Descartes' philosophical strategy cannot be understood except as involving the destruction (and revolutionary reconstruction) of the classical pre-Cartesian philosophical outlook. And, ironically, such was Descartes' success, that the pre-Cartesian period has increasingly (post-Descartes) come to be regarded as a philosophical 'dark age'. Thus have the arguments of Descartes' *Meditations* been rendered problematic, with the consequence that it has become difficult to see why they should be regarded as philosophically significant.

In Chapter One I examine briefly Anglo-American interpretive approaches to the *Meditations* and indicate something of the way in which Descartes' approach differed from that of his predecessors. I then consider (in Chapters Two - Four) Descartes' use of skeptical argument and show that, construed as an attack on the Thomist and neo-Platonist concepts of sense and intellectual perception, they destroy the realist foundations of classical pre-Cartesian epistemology and science.

I argue that the Cartesian reconstruction of philosophy and science begins with the introduction of the notion of a self-defining subject - a knowing subject whose existence is demonstrated, and essence defined, independent of the cosmic order. By this means, Descartes initiated a major 'paradigm shift'. This, *inter alia*, called for a transformation in the notion of a priori necessity, and resulted in a philosophical shift away from the Christian creature/Creator and Greek Form/matter distinction and their replacement by the characteristically modern mind/body and/or mind-dependent/independent distinction(s).

Thus situated, I show that the problem of the so-called Cartesian Circle is dissolved. Moreover, I argue that Descartes' proof of God's existence must be reassessed, firstly, in the light of the recognition that he has available the same response to Hume's attack on the necessity of a cause as that subsequently developed by Kant and, secondly, in the light of the uniquely Christian transformation of the classical Greek conceptions of finitude and infinitude. For this transformation not only underpins the move from the closed world of classical Greek science to the infinite universe of modern science, but provides a genealogy for the concept of God (= the Infinite) employed by Descartes to re-establish a realist foundation for science.

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