Rene Descartes is often said to be the founder not only of modern philosophy but also of modern thought more generally. His major work, Meditations on First Philosophy, of 1641, is still used today as a standard textbook in first-year philosophy courses. The book deals with a number of fundamental issues in metaphysics, one of which concerns the nature and existence of the human soul or mind. The issue of the nature of the mind is of course much debated by many present-day philosophers. But while Descartes is referred to as the most important early modern philosopher in the area, his views and arguments are mostly rejected, sometimes ridiculed. For example, Gilbert Ryle, in the middle of this century, thought it was appropriate to describe Descartes' view of the mind-body relationship as the myth of 'the ghost in the machine'. In dealing with Descartes' philosophy, however, present-day philosophers too often detach it from the 17th-century background to which it belongs and in relation to which it must be understood and evaluated. Colin Fowler, Master of John XXIII College at the ANU, has rectified this situation.

The context of Descartes' thought on the human soul is referred to in the subtitle of the book, The Demands of Christian Doctrine. Philosophers in Descartes' time were under considerable pressure to make their teaching compatible with the teaching of the church. The nature of the human soul was a particularly sensitive issue, for according to Christian doctrine, the human soul survives the death of the body, that is to say it is immortal. The church demanded of philosophers that they find arguments to support this doctrine. Thus, a Bull which was approved by a general council of the church in 1513 states: 'We condemn and reprove all those who assert that the intellective soul is mortal... And we decree that all those who hold statements of this kind of error are in all things to be shunned and punished as sowers of thoroughly condemned heresies, as detestable and abominable heretics, and underminers of the Catholic faith. Moreover, by strict command, we order each and every philosopher who lectures in universities, or in other public lectures, that... they should be obliged to make clear to their audience the truth of the Christian religion...' (Conciliorum oecumenicorum decret, ed. J. Albergio et al., Bologna 1973, pp. 605–6; transl. Chr. Martin).

Colin Fowler's book deals with precisely this interplay between philosophy and religion, reason and faith. In doing so, it combines admirably historical scholarship and philosophical argument. The details of Fowler's extensive and wide-ranging study, however, are very complex. Moreover, Fowler's contextual, historical approach requires massive documentation of both medieval and 17th-century sources that cannot be discussed here. But it is worth noting that the erudite nature of the book does not affect its readability. It opens dramatically with an account of the condemnation of Descartes and
then returns to the text of the Meditations and the letter of dedication, relating this material to the theological-political situation of the day. And quite apart from such stylistic highlights, the style of writing is refreshingly clear. In short, this book is a pleasure to read.

So, how does Descartes deal with this central metaphysical and theological issue, the nature of the human soul? Fowler shows that Descartes was committed to maintain the traditional links between Christian doctrine and philosophy, of faith and reason. In other words, Descartes believed that his philosophical theory of the soul fulfils the demands of Christian doctrine. In fact Descartes was convinced that his account of the human soul is not just compatible with the doctrine of immortality but that it supports it more strongly than do other philosophical theories, such as the medieval, scholastic theories. But, as Fowler points out, Descartes does not attempt to provide a complete proof of immortality. Rather, what he attempts to demonstrate is just that the human soul, the thinking substance, is quite separate from the body: that it is immaterial, and can exist without the body. This does not prove immortality but it shows that the soul is not bound to die with the body. To show this, according to Descartes, is all that is required as a foundation of religion. Yet he did not succeed in convincing the authorities and many of his contemporaries, and in 1663 a number of Descartes' writings were condemned by the church (no reason was given, though, for this condemnation).

Moreover, by making the soul an independent substance and thereby trying to provide a philosophical argument to defend the church's teaching on personal immortality, Descartes created a related but distinct problem for himself. This concerns the daunting task of reconstructing the human person by securing a union between mind and body. For Christian doctrine required more than the spirituality of the soul; it also required the unity of soul and body, the integrity of the human person (for example in the doctrine of the resurrection). Fowler explores in detail Descartes' attempts to respond to his critics but concludes that Descartes was not successful in convincing his contemporaries that his philosophy provides a rational demonstration of key soul doctrines and that he was worthy of the title 'Christian philosopher'.

Over the past 20 years or so there has been an increased recognition among Australian philosophers of the importance of the history of philosophy. This fact is highlighted by numerous conferences dealing with historical themes, by the establishment of a Society of the History of Philosophy in 1992, and by an increasing number of works by philosophers based in Australia who seriously concern themselves with historical questions in philosophy. Colin Fowler's book is a most important and major contribution to this development.