



# EAST MIDLANDS SALON

Founded in Derby in January 2010

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Cover: *Reading of Voltaire's tragedy of the Orphan of China*

*in the salon of Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin*

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# 1. Why a Salon in the twenty-first century?

The idea of the Salon was developed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. Typically, Salons were created and organised by aristocratic ladies to hear and debate the ideas of the great thinkers of the time. They bore out a commitment to ideas being important. At the same time, they also supplied entertainment, answered a need to know where the world was going – and, of course, provided a space to flirt.

The Salon was crucial to the intellectual ferment of the end of the eighteenth century. Salons hosted the great thinkers of the time: Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire. They were the scenes of excitement, outrage, and the shock of the new in a time when 'the new' still seemed possible. Salons signalled a time when the future was still an unwritten book.

**The East Midlands Salon** is organised in homage to those days, which only came to end with the eruption of the French Revolution and the arrival of a new constellation: the age of revolutions. Many historians think that Salons helped develop the ideas that ushered in that age.

The East Midlands Salon is organised by: Dennis Hayes, Ruth Mieschbuehler and Vanessa Pupavac

The East Midlands Salon, like those that currently exist in Birmingham, Dublin, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and Zurich, is inspired by the Academy of Ideas.

**The Academy of Ideas** is committed to:

- *The legacy of the Enlightenment: scientific and social experimentation, intellectual ambition and curiosity*
- *Embracing change and making history*
- *Art for art's sake, knowledge for its own sake, and education as an end in itself*
- *Freedom - to think, to act, to say what needs saying - even if it offends others*
- *Challenging irrational social panics*
- *Open and robust debate, in which ideas can be interrogated, argued for and fought over*
- *Civil liberties, with no ifs or buts*

## 2. About the East Midlands Salon

### Ruth Mieschbuehler

Derby has a tradition of philosophy stretching back to the Enlightenment. Erasmus Darwin founded The Derby Philosophical Society in 1783 but there had been an even earlier 'philosophical club' in the town. One of our Salon members, Professor Paul Elliot, has written an important study of The Derby Philosophers (Manchester University Press, 2009) – and today, philosophical issues remain among the most popular of our many debates. These have included 'Can kids do Kant?', 'Are children moral?', 'What's the use of philosophy?' and even 'The philosophy of trees'. Philosophy seems to be in the blood of the city.

Our first Salon, on Tuesday 26 January 2010, featured the distinguished philosopher, poet, novelist, cultural critic and clinical neuroscientist Professor Raymond Tallis. He defended the proposition 'I am NOT a Beast', explaining 'how we humans evolved to be so different', the theme of his then forthcoming philosophical essay Michelangelo's Finger: an exploration of everyday transcendence (Atlantic Books, 2011).

We met in the Derby Midland Hotel adjacent to the railway station. The hotel, which opened in 1841, was the first purpose-built railway hotel in the world. It remains one of our venues for major debates, but the Parlour of The Brunswick Inn hosts our regular events. Both buildings were part of the pioneering Victorian 'Railway Village' designed by Francis Thompson.

Other speakers over the years have included a diverse mix of writers, philosophers, educationalists, journalists, lawyers, performers and campaigners.

You may recognise many of the names in this list:

Dr Roba Al-Ghabra, Professor Nigel Biggar, Dr Martin Braddock, Simon Belt, Dr Jennie Bristow, Dr Jim Butcher, Tony Butler, Bill Carmichael, Dave Clements, Rosie Cuckston, Dolan Cummings, Dr Stuart Derbyshire, Professor Alex Danchev, Chrissie Daz, Ceri Dingle, Dr Ann Furedi, Luke Gittos, Rania Hafez, Professor Michael Hand, Richard Harris, Adrian Hart, Dr James Heartfield, Patrick Hayes, Professor Sarah Hayes, Jo Herlihy, Barbara Hewson, Elizabeth Hobson, Mick Hume, Katie Ivens, Anna Keenan, Geoff Kidder, Adam Kissel, Lesley Klaff, Professor Jason Lee, Dr Ellie Lee, Peter Lloyd, Rob Lyons, Dr Ken McLaughlin, Professor Philip Moriarty, Professor Anthony O'Hear, Anne M. Powers, Professor Jonathan Powers, David Perks, Charlie Peters, Jacob Reynolds, Dr Jasvinder Sanghera CBE, John Siddique, Tom Slater, Paul Thomas, Ella Whelan, Professor Brian Winston, Austin Williams, Dr Glynne Williams, Professor James Woudhuysen, Professor Paul Weller, Professor Michael Young, Dr Kevin Yuill.

Our Salon regulars are Nicky Drury, Professor Paul Elliott, Professor Dennis Hayes, Jo Herlihy, Father Daniel Joseph, Dr Nicholas Joseph, Dr Folasade Lamikanra, Dr Ruth Mieschbuehler, Dr Vanessa Pupavac and Dr Mladen Pupavac.

### **How does the East Midlands Salon work?**

The Salon has a distinctive format that encourages debate 'because debating ideas is important' – as our website declares. Individual speakers or panels have just 20 minutes to present their arguments. This means only five minutes each for panel speakers and the chairs are strict on time!

Contributions or questions are then taken from the audience in groups of three or four and then the speaker or panellists can respond. This process is repeated. At the end of the event, speakers are allowed one minute to give their final thoughts.

The pattern will be familiar to those who attend the Battle of Ideas festival every October in London or have been to other Academy of Ideas debates. The format is democratic; everyone attending has a chance to speak. We break with Battle of Ideas protocols only in asking people who speak from the audience to say who they are. For us, the East Midlands Salon is a club in the tradition of the Derby philosophers, and we are informal and friendly. Discussions continue in the hotel bar, or The Brunswick Inn, long after our speakers have concluded.

The regular members of the Salon are an eclectic bunch. They include, of course, one or two philosophers along with some students, teachers, university lecturers, writers, at least one poet, an imam, an archpriest of the Russian Orthodox Church, an Anglican chaplain, IT specialists, a researcher into drone technology, a lawyer and trade-union organiser and the co-ordinator of the Manchester Salon. Others come and go depending on whether the topic is of personal or professional interest.

Our regular members especially gain a wealth of knowledge and ideas in the tradition of the Enlightenment. They do not pursue instrumental interests but are committed to the spirit of the philosopher Immanuel Kant's motto for the Enlightenment: *sapere aude!* (Dare to Know!), which appears on the Salon banner.

I have been attending the Salon since I moved to Derby in 2010. The first time I went I was impressed but also a little intimidated by the high-profile speakers and the outstanding quality of debate and discussion. At first, I barely contributed to the discussions and struggled to follow some of the arguments. But I did the readings and learned to listen, and gradually was able to join in the debates.

I have since become one of the co-ordinators of the East Midlands Salon,

and chaired panel discussions. I have been a speaker at the East Midlands Salon and – something that would be amazing to my 2010 self – I have pitched, produced and spoken at sessions of the Battle of Ideas festival.

### **The importance of philosophical questions today**

Our concern with philosophy is not arcane or pretentious. We discuss topical issues, and these often raise profound philosophical questions.

For example, the current discussion on 'alternative facts', those that one side in any debate about Brexit or the election of Donald Trump declare to be 'true', raises the philosophical issue of relativism. This has been debated ever since Plato wrote his – to me – damning critique of relativism as a self-contradictory philosophy in the *Theaetetus*. In a sentence that critique is this: 'If a relativist says, "All truth is relative" – we simply ask "is that proposition true, or is it relative?"'. The self-contradictory nature of the statement is obvious, but more than 2,000 years after Plato's demolition of it, relativism is rife.

The irony is that today's relativists, who fill our universities and schools with the misguided idea that there are 'many truths', are now appalled at the suggestion that there are 'alternative facts'. This is a debate we must have at the Salon. Indeed, I have written my own critique of 'The refuge of relativism' and hope to find a latter-day Protagoras – Socrates' opponent in the *Theaetetus* – to debate me soon!

Alongside the discussion of 'alternative facts', we have discussed whether we should stage a major debate on another topical and complementary issue: 'Should we study dead white philosophers?' Some on the 'No' side believe not just that we should include a diverse range of philosophers on any course of study, but that philosophy is too 'white' and therefore alien to those with different skin colours. The debate continues.

Those who come to the Salons in Derby, or elsewhere, do perhaps not always realise how much time and thought is put into organising events. The examples just given should illustrate how we work and that we are prepared to have challenging debates. Deciding on our programme is as important an intellectual activity as having debates.

What we hope is that the debates we organise are in the tradition of the 'Derby Philosophers' and that the Enlightenment lives on through the East Midlands Salon.

### 3. The Enlightenment: A Beginner's Guide

**Paul Elliott**

The Enlightenment has often been regarded as a French-led intellectual phenomenon, centred around a group of philosophers whose achievements are exemplified by the vast 28-volume *Encyclopédie* (1751-72) edited by Denis Diderot (1713-84).

Inspired by the sciences, French intellectuals strove to recast the whole of knowledge: collecting information for comparative studies of different societies and constitutions, collecting and re-classifying, devising stadial histories and new systems of thought and in some cases such as that of François-Marie Arouet (better known as 'Voltaire') (1694-1778) and Jean Jacques Rousseau, advocating religious scepticism and Deism - or natural religion. Interestingly enough, Enlightenment science was often seen to support belief in 'the deity' rather than be at war with religion, as the work of many clerical naturalists demonstrate, such as Rev. Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne* (1789) and Rev. William Paley's *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802).

In recent decades, however, historians have emphasised distinctive national enlightenments such as those in the German states, Sweden or Scotland. At the same time, the relationship between the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution has been underscored in the British context by the concept of the Industrial Enlightenment.

Some scholars have likewise broadened the scope of Enlightenment to embrace developments in many aspects of thought, culture and society, including the arts, manufactures, religion, literature and print culture, making

clear definition harder.

### **The importance of the natural sciences**

Despite disagreements concerning the meaning, scope and coherence of Enlightenment, few of its students doubt the centrality of the natural sciences. The importance of the natural sciences is exemplified by the fundamental work of Isaac Newton (1640-1727), whose *Principia Mathematica* (1667) and *Optics* (1704), became the pre-eminent models for natural and experimental philosophy and intellectual understanding. *Principia Mathematica* defined the principles of gravitation and laws of motion that were held to be mathematically consistent and calculable and experimentally demonstrable. Altogether, with the *Queries of the Optics*, Newton provided a research programme for Enlightenment science.

Natural philosophers and intellectuals tried to discern kindred systems through studying the natural world and conducting experiments, as well as applying similar methods to other aspects of human endeavour such as history, politics and economics.

John Locke (1632-1704) and David Hume (1711-76) endeavoured to understand the processes of knowledge acquisition and investigate the relationship between mind and body. Francis Hutcheson (1694-1745) defined a moral sense as the basis of ethical and aesthetic judgements, while his student Adam Smith (1723-90) sought the laws of political economy in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Adam Ferguson and Edward Gibbon (1737-94) wanted to write a new philosophic history, most famously in the latter's monumental multi-volume *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) that investigated the cataclysmic rise and fall of nations through millennia.

### **A great age of intellectual effervescence**

The Enlightenment was a great age of intellectual effervescence that

dramatically extended the frontiers of knowledge, as new scientific instruments revealed an expanding cosmos with a multitude of apparently inhabited planets, microscopes revealed countless smaller worlds, and miners and geologists exposed mysterious subterranean realms.

Colonies established around the globe by European maritime powers brought wealth and resources flowing into Europe, and between each other, through conquest and exploitation. Novel and exotic specimens of plants, minerals and other objects were traded, as well as human cargoes in the transatlantic slave triangle that so enriched the merchant classes.

Knowledge acquisition for its own sake was perceived as a worthwhile endeavour across Europe and North America as a prelude to system-building and the discovery of new laws of nature, encouraging activities as diverse as plant and mineral collecting and classifying and the production of meteorological observations and diaries. New forms of sociability fostered the spread of ideas and critical engagement with knowledge internationally.

While printing had been around in Europe since the Renaissance, improvements in technology and in methods of reproducing illustrations and the relaxation of censorship facilitated the exchange of ideas and the development of what the German philosopher has famously described as the public sphere of rational critical debate.

The first real newspapers and periodical journals, such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*, carried a mixture of literary, social and scientific articles, while booksellers and printers appeared in most towns. Publication of books, maps and other ventures was made possible by public subscriptions which spread the cost and reduced the risk, creating virtual communities of those interested in the sciences.

The proliferation of printed material and spread of novel ideas was facilitated by new forms of sociability and opportunities for travel and tourism, aided by improved communications from turnpike roads to bridges and canals, that together fostered philosophical networks and created new audiences for the sciences and Enlightenment ideas.

### **A wide-ranging mix of Enlightenment publics**

Beyond the more famous elite of intellectuals and natural philosophers, the Enlightenment engaged a host of mineral collectors, mechanics, artists, craftsmen and tourists, women, some of the working classes and children, with some lectures and introductions to the sciences designed for young people, such as the dialogues of John Newbery and Oliver Goldsmith's much-reprinted Newtonian System of Philosophy adapted to the capacity of Young Gentlemen and Ladies by 'Tom Telescope' (1761).

Science became a polite and fashionable pursuit, exemplified by Joseph Addison's influential essays upon the 'Pleasures of the Imagination' and Joseph Wright of Derby's vivid candlelight paintings: 'A Lecture on the Orrery in which a Candle is placed as the Sun' (1764) and 'Bird in the Air Pump' (1767). Courses of scientific lectures in coffee houses, masonic lodges, theatres and private houses by itinerant lecturers such as the Scotsmen 'Blind' Henry Moyes (1750-1807) and James Ferguson (1710-76) brought the sciences to a large audience, travelling between towns along the newly improved turnpike road networks with their panoply of demonstration apparatus, including telescopes, microscopes, orreries, model steam engines, electrical machines and hydraulic apparatus.

There were distinctive urban and rural dimensions of Enlightenment cultures, particularly in the British context, including aspects of sociability promoted by the urban renaissance, urban government, institutions and many kinds of associations. The Enlightenment was driven by novel kinds of sociability:

this was the age of clubs and societies. The most influential British models for scientific societies were the Society of Arts and Manufactures and the Royal Society, the latter founded at the Restoration of Charles II, and literary and philosophical societies were founded in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, Derby and other rapidly expanding urban centres.

Other kinds of association had interests in the sciences, including the Linnean Society of London (1788), which focused on botany. There were also many British agricultural societies that sought to improve agriculture and horticulture through prize-giving and fostering studies of mineralogy and geology, plant and animal breeding and physiology, land drainage, meteorology and agricultural chemistry.

Some Enlightenment societies were relatively informal bodies while others had governing committees, rules and regulations, libraries, museums, laboratories and published their own memoirs modelled on the illustrious Royal Society.

The Lunar Society (c.1770), centred around Birmingham, is probably the most famous and had strong interests in the practical applications of science to mechanics, industry and domestic economy, as did the Derby Philosophical Society (1783) which has been described as the 'Industrial Enlightenment'. Lunar Society members included the industrialists James Watt (1736-1819), Matthew Boulton (1728-1809) and Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95), Thomas Day (1748-89), the author of the Rousseauian History of Sandford and Merton (1783-9), the geologist and mechanic John Whitehurst (1713-88) and the Lichfield and Derby physician Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802).

Members of literary and scientific societies typically included professionals such as medical men, lawyers and clergy, landed and urban gentry, middling sort merchants, businessmen and industrialists, but not usually women, although there were some exceptions: Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire



(1757-1806) was an honorary member of the Derby Philosophical Society, for instance.

Women and children were encouraged to attend philosophical lectures, undertook domestic scientific experiments, read - and subscribed to - scientific books, and eagerly embraced some sciences such as Linnaean botany.

Other groups took a keen interest in science - such as English and Welsh nonconformists or dissenters - partly because of their grounding of scientific education in dissenting academies, relative social marginality and exclusion, and emphasis upon individual self-education and improvement.

### **A contested legacy**

The legacy of Enlightenment has been much contested. It certainly contributed towards some major political developments, ranging from the relatively conservative 'Enlightened Despotism' of European rulers such as Joseph II of Austria (1741-90) and still more Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), to the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and French Revolution (1789).

Always Janus-faced, the Enlightenment revered past as much as present, especially the ideas, political systems, arts and architecture of antiquity as much as the modernity and progress of present and future, or more accurately, it saw them as inextricably intertwined through the concept of improvement.

It has been caricatured as an age of blind or masculine reason that revered automata, such as John Joseph Merlin and James Cox's Silver Swan (c.1770) and Wolfgang von Kempelen's fraudulent chess-playing Turk (c.1770), and produced Julien Offray de La Mettrie's notorious treatise *L'Homme Machine* (1748). Yet this era also gave birth to romanticism and was fascinated with madness and melancholia and the relationship between the mind and the

passions (emotions), and Edmund Burke's treatise on the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), which investigated the intense emotional experiences aroused by contemplation of the apparently limitless universe, boundless oceans, plunging caverns and craggy eminences links. This era links such diversity of thinking as Harris's *Directory of Covent Garden Ladies* (1757-95) with Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*.

### **Further Reading**

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## 4. Sex and the Rise of the Salon

**Dennis Hayes**

The term 'Enlightenment' has many uses, including spiritual ones. Norman Hampson, in his study *The Enlightenment* (1968), says that in the eighteenth century the term referred to a cluster of characteristics or attitudes in high concentration, which included: anti-clericalism or even anti-religious views; a celebration of the pagan classical past as an alternative to Christianity; a stress on reason; a desire for the systematic, particularly scientific explanation of things, in terms of natural and moral laws; a deep mistrust of excess and a delight in order.

These attitudes existed at different times but appeared with greater frequency and a higher concentration in Europe in the eighteenth century than at any other time. For all its detail, this sort of categorisation tends to ahistoricise the Enlightenment and its unique historical importance (by contrast, see Paul Elliott's piece in this pamphlet).

We need to discuss the Enlightenment now because: 'Reactions against the achievements of the Enlightenment dominate intellectual and cultural thought' (Furedi, LM 2000: 37). This is what Frank Furedi claimed in *Last Magazine* at the beginning of the century. It is a serious problem today because contemporary 'Identity politics represents a form of consciousness that is lower than that achieved centuries ago by Enlightenment thinkers' (ibid: 38). That consciousness celebrates what you are rather than what you have done and 'An accident of birth like ethnic origins, or an illness or disability, or a sexual preference, have been endowed with tremendous significance' (ibid: 38). We might say that today they have acquired a determining significance.

### **What does the Enlightenment tell us about being human?**

I want to focus on what is important about the Enlightenment by discussing, first of all, the Cartesian Cogito: cogito ergo sum – 'I think therefore I am'. The phrase was famously used by the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes in several works. Most famously it appears in the *Principles of Philosophy* in 1649, which was published shortly before his death in Stockholm where he was the guest of, and philosophy tutor to, Queen Christina of Sweden. The cogito captures more than Descartes' rationalism. It captures what became essential to the Enlightenment and our understanding of what it means to be human. It's not irrelevant to this essay that he wrote it at a time when his patron was a noblewoman.

In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes is struggling with the metaphysics of being. He creates what philosophy textbooks term the 'mind/body problem'. In his *Second Meditation*, 'Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is Easier to Know than the Body', he asks:

*But what, then, am I? A thing that thinks. What is a thing that thinks? That is to say, a thing that doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, does not will, that imagines also, and which feels. Indeed, this is not a little, if all these properties belong to my nature. (Descartes Second Meditation 'Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is Easier to Know than the Body': 106-7)*

To Descartes, what is in the mind is certain and all we can say about the external world – which may be a dream or the illusory construction of an 'evil demon' is '...all the same, at least, it is very certain that it seems to me that I see light, hear a noise and feel heat; and this is properly what in me is called perceiving and this, taken in this precise sense, is nothing other than thinking' (ibid: 107). In the *Fourth Meditation*, 'Of Truth and Error', he makes clear what he sees the human mind to be:

*...the idea I have of a human mind, inasmuch as it is a thinking thing, and not extended in length, breadth and depth, and does not participate in anything that pertains to the idea of the body, is incomparably more distinct than the idea of any corporeal object. (Descartes, Meditation 4, 'Of Truth and Error': 132)*

The Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body to the extent that the body's existence became problematic gives a truly revolutionary impetus to the Enlightenment.

It is the basis of human equality in the pursuit of truth, irrespective of your biology and whether you were part of 'the weaker sex'. Prior to this time, the assumption was that if you were a woman, you were weak in body and therefore in mind. Cartesianism did away with such sexual inequality, at least in terms of the mind. It created the possibility for women to lead the eighteenth-century Salons that were central to the Enlightenment.

### **Salons and Salonnières**

The Salons of the eighteenth century and the Salonnières who were their hostesses – elite and intelligent educated and educating women – were the form in which there came into being 'civil working spaces of the project of Enlightenment' (Goodman 1994:53). Salons met once or twice a week for dinner, followed by discussion. They were certainly not frivolous or merely about sociabilité or debate but were literary with a focus on writers and writing letters and newsletters. They took place outside of politics and the court in the private sphere, in houses with a mix of all social classes.

In the famous Salon of Marie-Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin, it was said that 'all ranks are mixed: the noble, the official, the financier, the writer, the artist, all are treated the same, so that... no rank remains except that of good society'

(Menton 2006: 206).

The Salonnières harmonised the strident critical voices of the Enlightenment, and people from diverse backgrounds behaved well under their influence. Controlling male egos and conversation were demanding, and Salonnières worked hard preparing for their Salons. Some wrote and published, as did those who came to their Salons, which became news bureaux in a country that had only state communications and censorship.

Salonnières controlled conversation and there is debate about whether they went so far as to control 'freedom of thought' as one male guest at the Geoffrin Salon said, that with a soft 'voilà' Madame Geoffrin 'did not fail to keep our minds as on a leash; and I had dinners everywhere where one was more at ease' (Goodman 1996: 107). Here is Dena Goodman's more balanced assessment:

*The Salon gave the Republic of Letters a social base, but even more important, it provided the republic with a source of order in the person of the salonnière. She gave order both to social relations among salon guests and to the discourse in which they engaged. The salonnière had always been crucial to the functioning of the salon; now she became crucial to the project of the Enlightenment carried out in and through it. (Goodman 1996:99)*

In the period preceding the French Revolution, anyone wanting to be a citizen of the republic of letters attended salons. After 1776, they declined and other institutions grew up which were often male dominated, such as La Blancherie's assemblée ordinaire or the salon de la correspondance and more political meetings, in particular the Jacobin Clubs.

You can get drawn into the debates between feminists and others about the

role of Salons and the Salonnières. The real importance is not about whether women's equality was real and to what extent. Indeed, the material basis for women's equality was not possible before it became possible to control fertility in the twentieth century.

Salons were the foundations of the public in the eighteenth century as they were places where reason, criticism and publication and publicity thrived.

Salons today are similar places, but they function in an environment worse than that described by Furedi in 2000. The form of consciousness that exists today is not merely lower than that achieved by Enlightenment thinkers; it is pre-Cartesian. The contemporary obsession with the body, with biology, with gender and transgender is trapping people back in their physical bodies. Salons need to challenge this reversion to biology by emphasising the mind and our human intelligence.

A start can be made – as we are trying to do here – by showing that Cartesian dualism for all its philosophical failings was a spur to the emancipation of women and to the Enlightenment.

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# EAST MIDLANDS SALON



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