

Cato's Letters: Reading and Discussion Guide

Cato's Letters was published as a series of essays in the 1720s by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. The two British authors used a pseudonym because they were afraid that the things they said would be unpopular with the government or other members of society. The pseudonym they used was Cato, who was a famous Roman philosopher. *Cato's Letters* was widely read in the American colonies, including by many of the Founders, and their arguments on republican government, including more democratic notions of freedom of speech, made them an influential political text in the decades leading to the American Revolution and the drafting of the Constitution.

Applying John Locke's ideas from the previous century to the political issues of the day, its arguments against tyrannical and oppressive government and in support of the liberty and freedom were quoted constantly. The essays deal with various topics ranging from freedom of speech and conscience to the rights possessed by all Englishmen by virtue of their nature as human beings, the benefits of freedom, the restraints on government, the nature of tyranny, and the right of men to resist oppression.

QUOTES AND PASSAGES FOR CLOSE READING AND DISCUSSION

"And it is as foolish to say, that government is concerned to meddle with the private thoughts and actions of men, while they injure neither the society, nor any of its members. Each man is, in nature and reason, the judge and disposer of his own domestic affairs; and every man must carry his own conscience. So that neither has the magistrate a right to direct the private behavior of men... government being intended to protect men from the injuries of one another, and not to direct them in their own affairs, in which no one is interested but themselves; it is plain, that their thoughts and domestic concerns are exempted entirely from its jurisdiction...where the magistrate meddles with such, he meddles impertinently or tyrannically."

"Let people alone, and they will take care of themselves, and do it best; and if they do not, a sufficient punishment will follow their neglect, without the magistrate's interposition and penalties. It is plain, that such busy care and officious intrusion into the personal affairs, or private actions, thoughts, and imaginations of men, has in it more craft than kindness; and is only a device to mislead people, and pick their pockets, under the false pretense of the public and their private good."

"True and impartial liberty is therefore the right of every man to pursue the natural, reasonable, and religious dictates of his own mind; to think what he will, and act as he thinks, provided he acts not to the prejudice of another..."

"Freedom of speech is the great bulwark of liberty; they prosper and die together: And it is the terror of traitors and oppressors, and a barrier against them. It produces excellent writers, and encourages men of fine genius. Tacitus tells us, that the Roman commonwealth bred great and numerous authors, who writ with equal boldness and eloquence: But when it was enslaved, those great wits were no

more. Tyranny had usurped the place of equality, which is the soul of liberty, and destroyed publick courage. The minds of men, terrified by unjust power, degenerated into all the vileness and methods of servitude: Abject sycophancy and blind submission grew the only means of preferment, and indeed of safety; men durst not open their mouths, but to flatter.”

“Freedom of speech, therefore, being of such infinite importance to the preservation of liberty, every one who loves liberty ought to encourage freedom of speech.”

“Without freedom of thought, there can be no such thing as wisdom; and no such thing as publick liberty, without freedom of speech.”

“This sacred privilege is so essential to free government, that the security of property; and the freedom of speech, always go together; and in those wretched countries where a man can not call his tongue his own, he can scarce call any thing else his own. Whoever would overthrow the liberty of the nation, must begin by subduing the freedom of speech; a thing terrible to publick traitors.”

“That men ought to speak well of their governors, is true, while their governors deserve to be well spoken of; but to do publick mischief, without hearing of it, is only the prerogative and felicity of tyranny: A free people will be shewing that they are so, by their freedom of speech.”

“Freedom of speech is ever the symptom, as well as the effect, of good government.”

“Guilt only dreads liberty of speech, which drags it out of its lurking holes, and exposes its deformity and horror to day-light.”

“The best princes have ever encouraged and promoted freedom of speech; they knew that upright measures would defend themselves, and that all upright men would defend them. Tacitus, speaking of the reigns of some of the princes above-mention’d, says with ecstasy, *Rara temporum felicitate, ubi sentire quae velis, & quae sentias dicere liceat* [Translation: “The rare good fortune of an age where one is allowed to feel what one wishes and to say what one feels.”]: A blessed time, when you might think what you would, and speak what you thought!”

“All ministers, therefore, who were oppressors, or intended to be oppressors, have been loud in their complaints against freedom of speech, and the licence of the press; and always restrained, or endeavoured to restrain, both. In consequence of this, they have brow-beaten writers, punished them violently, and against law, and burnt their works. By all which they shewed how much truth alarmed them, and how much they were at enmity with truth.”

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree with the statement: “Let people alone, and they will take care of themselves, and do it best; and if they do not, a sufficient punishment will follow their neglect, without the magistrate’s interposition and penalties.” Why or why not?
2. Consider the following statement: “Freedom of speech is the great bulwark of liberty; they prosper

and die together: And it is the terror of traitors and oppressors, and a barrier against them.” Why would freedom of speech be the “terror of traitors and oppressors, and a barrier against them”?

3. Is there a connection between freedom of speech and freedom of thought?
4. Consider the following statement: “Whoever would overthrow the liberty of the nation, must begin by subduing the freedom of speech.” Why do the authors consider freedom of speech so essential to liberty? You may refer to other quotations in your answer.
5. Consider the following statement: “Guilt only dreads liberty of speech, which drags it out of its lurking holes, and exposes its deformity and horror to day-light.” What did the authors mean by this? Can you give an example?
6. Consider the following statement: “Freedom of speech is ever the symptom, as well as the effect, of good government.” Do you agree? Why or why not? You may refer to other quotations in your answer.