

Syllabus of an Estimate of the doctrines of Jesus compared with those of others.

In a comparative view of the Ethics of the enlightened nations of antiquity, of the Jews, and of Jesus, no notice should be taken of the corruption of reason among the ancients, to wit, the idolatry and superstition of their vulgar, nor of the corruptions of Christianity by the over-learned among its professors.

Let a just view be taken of the moral principles inculcated by the most esteemed of the sects of ancient philosophy or of their individuals; particularly Pythagoras, Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, Antoninus.

- I. Philosophers. 1. Their precepts related chiefly to ourselves & the government of those passions which unrestrained would disturb our tranquility of mind.\* in this branch of philosophy they were really great.
2. In developing our duties to others they were short and defective. they embraced indeed the circles of kindred & friends, & inculcated patriotism, or the love of our country in the aggregate, as a primary obligation towards our neighbours & countrymen they taught justice, but scarcely viewed them as within the circle of benevolence still less have they inculcated peace, charity, & love to all our fellow men or embraced with benevolence the whole family of mankind.

II. Jews.

1. Their system was Deism, that is, the belief in one only god. but their ideas of him and of his attributes were degrading and injurious.
2. their Ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason & morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us, and repulsive & anti-social as respecting other nations they needed reformation therefore in an eminent degree.

III. Jesus. In this state of things among the Jews, Jesus appeared.

his parentage was obscure, his condition poor, his education null; his natural endowments great. his life correct & innocent, he was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested & of the sublimest eloquence. The disadvantages under which his doctrines appear are remarkable.

1. like Socrates and Epictetus he wrote nothing himself;
2. but he had not, like them, a Xenophon or Arrian to write for him. on the contrary, all the learned of his country, entrenched in it's power & riches were opposed to him, lest his labours should undermine their advantages: & the committing to writing his life & doctrines fell on the most unlettered & ignorant of men; who wrote too from memory, & not till long after the transactions had pass'd.
3. according to the ordinary fate of those who attempt to enlighten & reform mankind he fell an early victim to the jealousy & combination of the altar & throne, at about 33. years of age, his reason having not yet attained the maximum of it's energy, nor the course of his preaching which was but of about three years, presented occasions for developing a complete system of moral duties.

\* To explain, I will exhibit the heads of Seneca's & Cicero's philosophical works, the most extant of any we have received from the ancients. of 10. heads in Seneca, 7. relate to ourselves, to wit, de consolatione, de tranquillitate, de constantia sapientis, de otio sapientis, de vita beata, de brevitate vite. 2. relate to others, de clementia, de beneficiis, and 1. relates to the government of the world, de providentia. of 11. tracts of Cicero, 8. respect ourselves, viz. de finibus, Tusculana, Academica, Paradoxa, de Senectute. 1. de officiis, partly to ourselves, partly to others, 1. de amicitia relates to others, and 4. are on different subjects, to wit, de natura deorum, de divinatione, de fato, and Somnium Scipionis.

4. hence the doctrines which he really delivered were defective as a whole.

and fragments only of what he did deliver have come to us, mutilated, mistated, & often unintelligible.

5. they have been still more disfigured by the corruptions of schismatising followers, who have found interest in sophisticating & perverting the simple doctrines he taught, by engrafting on them the mysticisms of a Grecian Sophist, prattling them into subtleties & obscuring them with jargon, until they have caused good men to reject the whole in disgust, & to view Jesus himself as an impostor.

Notwithstanding these disadvantages, a system of morals is presented to us, which if filled up in the true style & spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.

The question of his being a member of the god-head, or in direct communication with it, claimed for him by some of his followers, & denied by others, is foreign to the present view, which is merely an estimate of the intrinsic merit of his doctrines.

1. He corrected the Deism of the Jews, confirming them in their belief of one only god, and giving them juster notions of his attributes and government.
2. His moral doctrines relating to kindred & friends were more pure & perfect than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more than those of the Jews. and they went far beyond both in inculcating universal philanthropy, not only to kindred & friends, to neighbours & countrymen, but to all mankind, gathering all into one family under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids, a development of this head will evince the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others.
3. The precepts of philosophy, & of the Hebrew code, laid hold of actions only. he pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man; erected his tribunal in the region of his thoughts, and purified the waters at the fountain head.
4. He taught emphatically, the doctrine of a future state, which was either doubted or disbelieved by the Jews; and wielded it with efficacy, as an important incentive, supplementary to the other motives to moral conduct.

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