THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF ASA SHINN

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The first full-length defense of the Wesleyan message, published in America, was Asa Shinn’s *An Essay on the Plan of Salvation*, a treatise that *The History of American Methodism* calls “profoundly reflective.” However, Shinn’s Essay has scarcely been appreciated for its significance and at times has been misunderstood. Charles Rogers, surveying the development of an “indigenous American Methodist theology,” read Shinn’s Essay as a systematic theology:

It is an important book primarily because it stands as the systematic expression of theological views which were present in the official doctrinal standards and which were worked out in the business of itinerant preaching in America. It is important also because it contributed to the further development of Methodist theology, particularly through its influence on such men as Nathan Bangs and Daniel D. Whedon, as well as on countless numbers of preachers. At the conclusion of his discussion on Shinn’s Essay, Rogers expressed difficulty reading this treatise as a “systematic theology”: “There may be some question whether this is an accurate representation of the thought of John Wesley on these matters. What it does represent is the way in which American Methodists, in their own historical context, were coming to under-

stand Wesleyanism.” However, read as a “systematic theology,” Shinn’s Essay can scarcely be called an exposition of Wesley’s thought. Indeed, it rarely mentions Wesley. However, the Essay was a vigorous attack on the enemies of early American Methodism, and a passionate defense of Arminianism and republicanism. Shinn enhanced the Essay’s effectiveness by casting it in the form of a moral philosophy, a treatise on the nature of Truth in the natural law tradition. He drew his arguments from a multitude of scholarly resources and thus provided preachers with an array of arguments to silence the critics on their circuits, identify with republicanism, and commend Methodism. For the sake of brevity, this article will discuss only the Essay’s response to philosophical skepticism.

Publishing his Essay in 1813, Shinn borrowed extensively from British and Scottish moral philosophy (a line which stretched from the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, through Samuel Clarke, Francis Hutcheson, and Thomas Reid) and continued the philosophical tradition that had critiqued the associationism of Thomas Hobbes for more than a century. Extensive citations from contemporary sources in the Essay’s arguments, pieced together by ridicule and rhetoric, indicate that Shinn read widely in the theological and philosophical debates of his day. He probably composed the Essay as a resource for Methodist circuit riders challenged by hecklers on their circuits—a repository of rhetoric which shored up Christian orthodoxy against the onslaught of philosophical skepticism which threatened early America. In this capacity, the Essay reflects the theological and philosophical issues encountered by early American Methodist circuit riders.

Although the Essay claimed to be objective, Shinn filled its 416 pages with passionate conviction and querulous controversy with his opponents. He stated in his defense that, “the author, from the beginning to the end, has been governed by a conviction that he ought to follow evidence wherever it should lead, without ever suppressing or departing from any part of it, through the fear of deviating from the sentiments of any man, or any number of men in the world” Shinn gave no quarter to dissenting perspectives, especially “infidelity” [philosophical skepticism], “papery” [Roman Catholicism], and “antinomian divinity” [Calvinism]. Convinced that the right use of reason and common sense would dispel the fogs of doctrinal error, Shinn urged his readers to exercise their minds and inquire deeply into the nature of true religion: “Let all men thus use their reason, and the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ will rise like the sun in the midst of heaven,

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5Shinn, An Essay on the Plan of Salvation, preface [n.p.].
and chase the dark mists of error from mankind.”6 The right exercise of human faculties would promote human happiness, the chief end of knowledge.7 The desire for happiness is an innate tendency that proceeds from the natural faculties of humanity. However, the means to happiness are widely varied, and people must obtain knowledge to find happiness. Knowledge comes through the natural faculties within each person (“common sense”) and reason, as well as through divine revelation.8

6 Shinn, Essay on the Plan of Salvation, 170. Shinn may have appropriated this perspective from John Locke, whose moderate position affirmed reason as the criterion by which to judge the veracity of revelation. Rem Edwards observes that this position differs from the 18th century deists who rejected revelation as a source of knowledge. See Rem B. Edwards, A Return to Moral and Religious Philosophy in Early America (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 90–91. Shinn was also influenced by Samuel Clarke and other ethical rationalists, whose concern for reason as the sole source for morality arose from their insistence that moral principles were immutable and eternal. Ethical rationalists despised Hobbes, especially since the latter made morality depend on “the will of the sovereign power.” See Frederick C. Beiser, The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 266–269. However, Shinn’s Essay relies more on intuition (as with Hutcheson and Reid) than reason as the principal means of religious knowledge. The Essay has obviously been drawn from disparate sources, such as Samuel Clarke, and Shinn’s appropriation of Clarke’s appeal to “self-evidence” is clear. Mackie clarifies Clarke’s style of argument “a balloon of rhetoric,” and this style characterizes Shinn’s Essay. See J. L. Mackie, Hume’s Moral Theory (London and New York: Routledge, 1980), 18. According to Gauvreau, the Moderate Enlightenment’s insistence on reason as the criterion of revelation was rejected by John Wesley under the influence of John Hutchinson, “who denied the possibility of a natural theology in the sense understood by Newton and his supporters.” Hutchinson asserted the priority of divine revelation in the Bible that “contained the true description of nature’s processes.” Gauvreau cites Richard Watson on this point, stating that “inquiries concerning the divine nature . . . must depend exclusively upon revelation.” Michael Gauvreau, “The Empire of Evangelicalism: Varieties of Common Sense in Scotland, Canada, and the United States,” in Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 239. According to footnote 106 (page 251), the citation of Watson comes from his Theological Institutes 1:334–335. Shinn’s “un-Wesleyan” turn should be credited to the polemics of the American intellectual environment, in which Shinn and other Methodists had to battle widespread philosophical skepticism. Randy Maddox has attributed the scarce mention of Wesley in the Essay to Shinn’s primitivism. This may have been a factor, but the most likely reason was the polemical environment in America. See Randy L. Maddox, “Respected Founder/Neglected Guide: The Role of Wesley in American Methodist Theology,” Methodist History 37:2 (January 1999), 74. Maddox made a similar point at the “Wesleyan Studies Teach-In” held at Colgate Rochester Divinity School (Rochester, NY), 22 September 2000.


8 The Enlightenment affirmed the competence of individuals to “think for themselves,” apart from authoritarian institutions, and on this point Shinn imbibed the essence of the Enlightenment outlook. According to Kinast, the enlightenment encouraged (1) a “turn to the subject” (individualism) and (2) critical thinking. The “turn to the subject” “represents the Enlightenment’s rebellion against what it perceived as excessive control of individuals by the prevailing institutions of the time—the monarchy, the Church, and the wealthy. Instead of conforming to the authority and decisions of these institutions . . . the Enlightenment urged every
In his first section of the Essay, Shinn examined the means that God has ordained to distinguish between truth and falsehood, a means held by all people (in their right mind). God has implanted in humanity an innate sense of right and wrong, by which people can intuitively perceive the distinction between truth and falsehood. This innate sense provides the capacity to distinguish “first principles,” or “self-evident truths,” which do not require the exercise of reason. Their truthfulness is immediately apparent to the mind. Shinn’s realism is set forth in his definition of truth: “By the word truth, in its general application, I understand those propositions, or decisions of the judgment, which accord with the real existence, properties and relations of all things: those which do not thus accord with real existence, properties and relations, are false.” Restating the philosophy of Thomas Reid, Shinn affirmed the existence of an external world independent of the mind and the sense data it receives. Later in the essay, Shinn railed against “sophists” and other philosophers in the line of George Berkeley and David Hume, who questioned or even denied the existence of a world external to the mind, affirming only the reality of ideas. Appropriating Reid’s ‘common sense’ realism, Shinn’s epistemology relied on innate faculties of the experiencing self, and rejected the associationism of Hobbes. Like Reid, Shinn affirmed both the material world and the validity of belief in an age of skepticism, in effect, making room for Christian supernaturalism.


For an excellent study of the natural law tradition see J. Budziszewski, Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).


Shinn, Essay on the Plan of Salvation, 11. Shinn’s drew his understanding of “first principles” from Thomas Reid. “Reid’s theory of common sense is based on what he calls ‘first principles,’ a term first used by Aristotle. Reid’s ‘first principles’ are given to humans by God and thus do not require any justification or reasoning about them. Broaddus, “Moral Sense Theory in the History of Rhetoric,” 79.

Shinn, Essay on the Plan of Salvation, 12.

An excellent summary of Reid’s “common sense” realism can be found in Allen Jayne, Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy and Theology (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 92-98.

“Reid’s philosophical aim is to destroy the skepticism of Hume and the idealism of Berkeley without destroying empiricism.” Broaddus, “Moral Sense Theory in the History of Rhetoric,” 76. Broaddus adds on pages 76-77, “Reid’s statements about Hume’s philosophy more aptly apply to the philosophy of the Anglican Bishop George Berkeley. While Hume argues that we have no evidence and no apparatus for reasoning beyond our own experience, Berkeley denies that the material world exists.” Broaddus concludes on page 77, “Thus Reid attacks two philosophical positions, both of which rely on empiricism for their arguments: skepticism, which admits nothing except that which can be known directly through sense experience, and idealism, which admits nothing of material substance at all. Reid argues that the material world does indeed exist and that humans do have an awareness of it, an awareness that relies on belief for validity.” Shinn opposed Hobbes’ moral skepticism—that morality is grounded in the social contract rather than nature. On this point, Shinn also drew polemical material from ethical rationalists such as Samuel Clarke in order to affirm the immutability and eternal nature of morals.
Shinn’s epistemology depended on “evidence” as the ground of Truth, and the degree of evidence manifested in perception regulated the degree of certainty of truth ascertained.¹⁵ This dependence characterized the empiricism of Bacon, Locke, Hutcheson, and Reid, and constituted the foundation of knowledge.¹⁶ As Broaddus points out, moral sense theory was based on empiricism applied to moral philosophy. She states, “Empirical philosophers held in common the assumption that all knowledge stems from sense experience and that, indeed, sense experience is the only valid basis for maintaining any proposition as a matter of fact.” According to Broaddus, Bacon “articulates the foundation of empiricism,” that knowledge comes through observation of particulars, and generalizing about the world only on the basis of those observations. This forms the basis of scientific investigation, but does not rule out the validity of “metaphysical truth.” Broaddus emphasizes, “His intent was not to reject the latter, but rather to have inductive empiricism serve as guide for the former [scientific investigation].”

In Bacon’s worldview, God created the universe then left it to run itself... Following this perception of God, natural law and natural philosophy become manifestations of God’s work. Thus scientists and philosophers after Bacon began to study nature, not as an end in itself, but more as a means to understanding God’s design in the world.¹⁷

Moral philosophy thus consisted of a systematic, empirical investigation of the world and the operations of the mind to discover the design of the universe and construct a pattern for life. Since moral philosophy united disparate fields under a common epistemology, its ambition for a systematic perspective forced the rhetorical harmonization of knowledge. This harmonization reassured the immutability of morality when the latter was threatened by the dissolution of knowledge—the breakup of the God-centered universe—and enabled clergy, scientists, and philosophers to incorporate new knowledge into a God-centered universe, but which God-centered universe? Catholic? Reformed? Arminian? Deist? While Reformed theologians could accept the inductive empiricism of the scientific revolution, they rejected deism/skepticism as a basis for morality. Arminians could brook neither the deism/skepticism nor the predestinarian views common among Scottish philosophers. Neither Reformed nor Arminian could accept a Catholic universe. As a Methodist/Arminian, Shinn attacked skepticism, Catholicism, and Calvinism, and set forth a common-sense epistemology against all these forms of “deceit.”

¹⁶“But as all truth is to be known in this way, it appears very desirable to understand what this certain something is, which we call evidence. If truth is known by this, and by nothing else; and if we have no power to discover evidence or to conceive any thing concerning its nature, it is plainly impossible for us to know any thing concerning what is true and what is false.” Shinn, *Essay on the Plan of Salvation*, 12–13. For a thorough discussion of Bacon’s influence on Reid see Alan Wade Davenport, “Evidence and Belief, Common Sense, and the Science of Mind in the Philosophy of Thomas Reid” (Ph.D. diss., American University, 1987).
Shinn's 'scientific' methodology—his empirical, inductive approach to the world—required several assumptions about epistemology. This becomes apparent in his discussion of evidence as "testimony, experience, and clear demonstration." He stated that while the term "evidence" eludes precise definition, "there is something" in evidence "that is naturally calculated to produce belief or conviction in an intelligent being that the thing thus proved is true: and this something which naturally tends to produce belief or conviction is what we mean by evidence." 18 Shinn also assumed that the natural faculties of humanity—the senses—are a reliable means of knowledge—that human perception faithfully transmits an accurate picture of the world. Since these faculties have been implanted in humanity by God the Creator, to doubt the reliability of human perception is to cast aspersion on God. For Shinn, it was inconceivable that God would plant faulty means of perception in humanity. On this score, humanity could not be held morally accountable, since people would be unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and thus between right and wrong. That was impossible, because Shinn understood God's nature—not as sovereignty, as in Calvinism—but as moral goodness, manifested to humanity in the form of benevolence.19 This was a major pillar for Shinn's argument. On the basis of God's benevolence, human faculties are trustworthy means by which the world is known. These trustworthy faculties rest on immutable moral principles that stand prior to reason: (1) "There is one kind of conduct that is right and another kind that is wrong." (2) "Right and wrong are opposite to each other, and it is impossible that they should be the same." (3) "All mankind ought to do that which is right, and to avoid doing that which is wrong." (4) "That conduct which tends to promote general happiness is right, and that which tends to promote general misery is wrong." 20 On this basis, Shinn affirmed that any person, in his/her right mind, with his/her hand on one's heart and an open Bible in front of oneself, casting off tradition and adherence to a creed or party, could come to knowledge of the Truth, especially truth about morality.21


19 Broaddus offers a critique of the benevolence of God in the moral utilitarianism of Francis Hutcheson: "From this point-of-view an action is judged by whether its effects extend to the general interests of humanity. . . He argues that our sense of beauty and our moral sense stem from divine goodness; by giving humans the moral sense God has demonstrated benevolent intent." Broaddus points to this concept as "a major weakness in Hutcheson's philosophy. Hutcheson fails to distinguish between the motives of an act and the consequences of it." Broaddus, "Moral Sense Theory in the History of Rhetoric," 43.


21 Shinn's affirmation rests on the moral sense theory, which posited a moral sense analogous to the physical senses. Since the latter cannot make moral distinctions, Hutcheson believed God to have endowed humanity with an innate moral sense. Shinn combined this moral epistemology with republicanism, and consequently rejected human authority as a source of moral knowledge. Shinn's involvement with Reform Methodism may have been a consequence of his moral Newtonianism.
Although he appears to refute skepticism about sensation, especially Hume’s skepticism, Shinn never rose to the level of Hume’s philosophical arguments. Rather, Shinn’s arguments bolster thinking at the ‘plebian’ level—the understanding of everyday life—and affirmed the ability of common people to think for themselves. Shinn’s Essay may have sounded convincing to people of “good sense,” but his arguments required numerous assumptions that people often make about everyday life. Shinn was doubtless a brilliant thinker and writer, whose arguments could win the day in a public debate, but his evidence assumed too much at the level of belief. This is the weakest point of Scottish realism, the assumption of the trustworthiness of everyday life. In the minds of common people, the arguments in Shinn’s Essay solidly refuted skepticism. However, the Essay addressed these issues by drawing selections from the Bible and contemporary resources, and re-casting those selections in terms of Scottish realism as a strategy to eliminate doubt. This elimination of doubt would establish the immutability of morals by the reaffirmation of a God-centered world. Although the Essay is deeply rooted in Methodist piety, Shinn’s strategy introduced a strong rationalistic character into the Wesleyan tradition.

22 The history of philosophy apparently has a legacy of misreading Hume. As Donald Livingston states, “Granted that Hume’s philosophy may have had some such negative influence on our intellectual culture, the question remains whether the negative theses in question are really in Hume’s work or whether they have been read into it by a rationalistic mind which is morbidly vulnerable to skepticism of any kind. In short, the supposedly destructive Humean legacy may be just the melancholy realization that the rationalistic program of early modern philosophy . . . is impossible, a point which Hume’s whole philosophy appears designed to show.” Donald W. Livingston, “Introduction,” in *Hume: A Re-Evaluation*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 7.


24 Shinn, *Essay on the Plan of Salvation*, 31. Since Shinn’s argument depends so heavily on Reid’s common sense realism, it also suffers from its weaknesses. As Michaud points out, Reid’s rejection of idealism because of the latter’s skeptical outcomes is “the best known aspect of Reid’s philosophy” and in Michaud’s opinion “is also its weakest aspect.” Reflecting on Reid’s championship of common sense, Michaud points out “Kant’s rebuke in the *Prolegomena*” that “there is no reason why the ordinary man should be trusted rather than the skeptic—unless we decide to settle philosophical controversies by a vote.” See Yves Michaud, “Reid’s Attack on the Theory of Ideas: From a Reconsideration of Reid’s Arguments to a Reassessment of the Theory of Ideas,” in *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, ed. Melvin Dalgarno and Eric Matthews (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989), 14–16.

25 For example see Shinn, *Essay on the Plan of Salvation*, 27. Shinn’s tactics indicate he did not directly answer Hume; rather, his rhetorical devices indicate he is supplying Methodist preachers with homiletical ammunition to encourage common people to reject skepticism and embrace Methodism.

26 For example, Shinn replaced John Wesley’s concept of a ‘spiritual sense’ with Francis Hutcheson’s ‘moral sense,’ and thus traded Wesley’s emphasis on prevenient grace for the English Enlightenment’s emphasis on natural human ability. Shinn deeply imbibed the spirit of
strategy linked an assumed trustworthiness of sensation with an assumed trustworthiness of religious experience and provided Wesleyan theology with a philosophical foundation that had widespread currency. Shinn’s Essay answered the skeptics splendidly, as long as the fortunes of Scottish realism held out, by ridiculing their ‘infidelity’ and commending the Truth about the God-centered universe.

Reinforcing his arguments, Shinn provided three tests of the truth of first principles (see note 23 below), including the following: “A degree of credit is due to human testimony (Shinn’s emphasis).” He then employed his argument ad absurdum, where the opposite of a proposed first principle is assumed to be true, and demonstrated to be a “chain of manifest absurdities.” He applied this “truth by falsification” to the commonplace taking of human testimony for granted, and skillfully turned the argument into sharply contrasting alternatives, one of which would be readily accepted, and another which would be immediately rejected for its absurdity. Shinn used this rhetorical tool throughout his essay and in this instance he demonstrated the absurdity of the person who refused to give any credit to human testimony.27 This manner of argument probably convinced most readers of the Essay. However, this rhetoric never directly answered the skepticism of Hume since its most likely purpose was to help Methodist ministers win converts on their circuits. The sharp division between truth and absurdity was at the same time the Essay’s strength and weakness. This strength and weakness was based on the epistemological foundation of Shinn’s Essay, that any person in his/her right mind could comprehend “first principles” if these principles were held up in a clear light. The use of terms like “self-evident” may have sounded convincing to readers disposed to accept them uncritically, but Shinn’s agenda was distinctly Methodist, Arminian, and democratic, most likely aimed at Methodist ministers favorably disposed toward republicanism. Shinn’s argument reflected a style, common in the debating societies of this period, which Broaddus calls “epideictic rhetoric.” This type of rhetoric reinforced one’s own position by portraying an opponent’s as absurd.28 The critical reader can observe Shinn warming up to this technique in the following statement regarding the Aristotelian logic he employs in his Essay: “From what has been said, it is plain—that all our reasonings must ultimately be founded, either upon self-evident truths, upon manifest falsehoods, or upon hypotheses, which have been invented by the flights of imagination and conjecture (Shinn’s emphasis).”29 Shinn prepared

the American Revolution with its “apotheosis of liberty” [Noll’s term], and concomitant emphasis on “free will.” See Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” 226.

21 For examples device see Shinn, Essay, 39.


29 Shinn, Essay on the Plan of Salvation, 43. Note his severe critique of Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason, in which Shinn employed the argument ad absurdum to demonstrate Paine’s “reason”
his readers to accept these premises and consequently his argument, and to reject all positions that allegedly did not stand on self-evident principles (especially those of Hume, Berkeley, Paine, Calvin, and Rome). Shinn urged his readers to think for themselves and reject authoritarian systems such as Catholicism. He encouraged them to accept thinking which seemed intuitively correct, especially when discussing one of the major epistemological questions of the 18th century—the nature of ideas. Shinn rejected the notion that ideas have a separate existence apart from human thought and embraced the proposition that sense perception is immediately apparent to the human mind. He contrasted the two positions in two columns, side-by-side: (1) “God has given us the sense of seeing and hearing, and other senses, whereby we immediately perceive many external objects, with an immediate conviction of their present existence.” (2) “By the sense of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling, we perceive nothing but ideas in our brain; and all the knowledge we can have, of any thing in the world, is by inference from the ideas which we perceive.” Then he appealed to his readers’ common sense and prejudice:

Which of these positions are we to receive as an axiom of truth, on which to build a system? Which of the two appears to stand most in need of argument to prove it? Is it enough for a man to tell us, very gravely, that the first is a vulgar error, and the other is altogether philosophical? So would his holiness, in St. Peter’s chair, inform us, that we must contradict our senses, and believe that a piece of bread is really a god, otherwise we are vulgar heretics that have no just ideas of the true divinity.

as “ridicule and conjecture.” According to Shinn, ‘true reason’ would lead the inquirer to the Truth, i.e., Christian belief, rather than to skepticism.

Shinn’s eventual rejection of episcopal authority—first of all Catholicism, and eventually Methodist episcopacy, stemmed directly from his epistemology. Access to truth directly through common sense, reason and revelation made each person the locus of authority on matters of truth—and here is the philosophical foundation for Jacksonian democracy and Reform Methodism. See Asa Shinn, Appeal to the Citizens of the United States (Baltimore: Printed by R. J. Matchett, 1827), 5–6. On pages 6–7 Shinn makes it clear that he did not reject human authority outside the individual, but rather rejected the assertion of human authority in place of the individual’s right to exercise his/her reason and to believe the divine revelation in the Bible. Shinn appealed to the anti-Catholic sentiments of his readers when he criticized Methodist episcopacy. Discussing “the original design of the Methodists, to ‘spread Scripture [sic] holiness over the land,’” Shinn urged, “Let it never be forgotten, that the first Christians set out with as a pure a design as we did, and yet, by degrees, the original purpose was slyly and gradually abandoned; and the deceitful stratagem was invented, that whatever belonged to popery, belonged to “Scripture holiness.” Just as we are now in danger of imbibing the same sentiment, in regard to Methodism. Let it be recollected also, that true holiness implies a holy willingness that every man should think and judge for himself, and that every thing in Methodism, which cannot bear examination, should be given to the moles and the bats.” Asa Shinn, A Brief Review of Doctor Bond’s “Appeal to the Methodists.” (Baltimore: Printed by Richard J. Matchett, 1827), 52. The appeal to republican principles and the critique of Methodist episcopacy as arbitrary and imposed were major reasons for the formation of the Methodist Protestant Church, according to contemporary accounts. See R. F. Shinn, A Trite to Our Fathers, especially pages 58–71.

Shinn, Essay, 46.
Shinn referred his readers to Dr. Reid’s Essays, vol. I, p. 205, and stated, “All I have to do with the matter, is to illustrate the difference between a first principle and an hypothesis, as the proper ground of reasoning.” He then pursued his argument *ad absurdum* and pointed out Dr. Reid’s philosophy as providing astronomy with a “solid foundation”—“then navigators and surveyors of land are really measuring the parts of an external universe, and are not employed in marking the distance of one idea from another in their brains (Shinn’s emphasis).” Shinn ridiculed idealism by remarking that the “husbandman, when following his plow, is really making a furrow upon solid ground, and not upon an idea in his brian.” On the contrary, “if he had ‘but the slightest philosophy,’ it seems, this universal and primary notion of all men would soon be destroyed.”

Shinn was willing to concede that ideas “may serve as an instrument or medium of perception,” but ideas could never “usurp the place of other things,” namely the material universe “which God has created.” For Shinn, people perceive real objects in an external universe and they perceive the objects themselves, not ideas of those objects. His intention was to eliminate doubt in human knowledge, not only in the material world, but in spiritual matters as well. Shinn cited Thomas Reid’s reference to John Locke as the source of the teaching, “‘that all the immediate objects of human knowledge, are ideas in the mind.’” He then pointed out that “Bishop Berkeley, proceeding upon this foundation, demonstrated very easily, that there is no material world” while still affirming the existence of spiritual entities. In contrast, Hume “adopts the theory of ideas in its full extent: and, in consequences, shows that there is neither matter nor mind in the universe; nothing but impressions and ideas. What we call a body, is only a bundle of sensations; and what we call the mind, is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions, without any subjects.” Shinn joined Reid in dismissing these speculations that, “together with the fantasies of Popery,” often brought reproach on the exercise of reason. Shinn did not discourage the use of reason, but deplored the misapplication of reason to hypotheses and conjectures. Reason could build a scientific basis for moral philosophy only through Baconian induction. These statements indicate that Shinn borrowed his arguments, including this criticism of Berkeley and Hume, mostly from Thomas Reid. Berkeley and Hume, as well as

32“He would immediately make the astonishing discovery that the house, which sheltered him from the storm, was nothing but a enormous idea that contained his whole family in its bosom! Being fully instructed in the metaphysical transubstantiation, he would understand that on his wedding day he was married to an idea, and that his children are all young ideas, growing up like olive plants around (the idea of) his table.” Shinn, Essay, 46–47.

33 Shinn, Essay, 48.

34But let it be remembered, that those ideal conjectures, and atheistical conclusions, are as opposite to true reasoning, as darkness is opposite to light, and truth to hypotheses and absurdity.” Shinn, Essay, 52.

35See Shinn, Essay, 53. This statement follows an extensive quotation from Thomas Reid’s Essay I, chap. vi, page 73. Shinn is referring to Reid’s Essay on the Active Powers of the Human Mind (1788).
Locke, had answered and extended the naturalistic philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, in which Human society was a selfish struggle for equilibrium. Shinn joined Thomas Reid, Samuel Clarke, and a host of lesser-known philosophers and clergy who tried to shore up the traditional Christian perspective. These British and Scottish philosophers beheld the universe as a "single harmonious system and that in one way or another no serious disharmony need be expected between observed events and preferred values." Nothing could ultimately be disharmonious, for God was Creator and Sustainer of all. Truth was a seamless robe that could not be torn asunder through experimental scientific methods, and any alleged disparity in truth(s) was attributed to human ignorance. According to Vereker, to maintain this harmonious vision these philosophers had to interpret God and the world in rationalistic, philosophical terms, rather than in traditional, incarnational terms. The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed a spreading influence of deistic thinking, the result of "divorce and dismemberment" between God and nature, reason, and revelation. This crisis of authority prompted clergy and philosophers to answer the "skeptics" in Aristotelian terms and construct a comprehensive vision of reality in light of scientific discovery, the spread of naturalism and rejection of Christian doctrines. This unified vision of reality was vital for the support of universal standards for morality and as Vereker points out, "Authority for a universal standard must derive either from reason or revelation." For Shinn, authority for universal standards of morality stood on reason and revelation, a bulwark of Christian truth against skepticism.

Shinn’s discussion of revelation follows Reid who saw revelation as an extension of reason. For Shinn, God is the author of sense perception just as surely as God is the author of revelation, with the exception that the person to whom the revelation has been given is aware that the communication of information has been divinely given. Sense perception and revelation work together in a harmonious relationship since God is the author of both. Faith in the credibility of sense perception is required as well as faith in the truthfulness of revelation, and the person who discredits the former cannot be expected to believe the latter. Shinn shared Reid’s commitment to empiri-
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cism, even to the point of applying empiricist principles to the revealed data provided by divine revelation. Faith in the trustworthiness of sense perception (empiricism) was equivocated with the kind of faith required for the reception of divine revelation. This rhetorical bridge in Shinn’s Essay placed the everyday data of sense perception on the same plane as religious knowledge. The same kind of faith was required for both kinds of knowledge. These rhetorical devices formed the cornerstone of argument for a harmonious universe among 18th century divines and sounded convincing in a world accustomed to speaking of God, even in scientific matters. Shinn took his argument for the truth of divine revelation directly from Reid’s defense of the trustworthiness of sense perception. Discussing the example of Paul’s knowledge of the storm and his “revealed knowledge” of the outcome, Shinn affirmed both kinds of knowledge as grounded in the character of God. Like other Christian moral philosophers with an 18th-century understanding of the universe, including William Paley, Shinn argued that since God was the author of both natural phenomena and supernatural revelation, to assume trustworthiness of the one was to assume the trustworthiness of the other. Distrust of divine revelation calls into question the reliability of all human faculties, and such distrust “saps the foundation of all human knowledge, and at once precipitates us into the dark chaos, among the atoms and blind goddesses of atheism.” God was the Author of all truth, and had implanted the means for knowing truth within humanity. To doubt the means of knowledge was to cast aspersion on the divine Author, undercut the foundations of knowledge, and launch the doubter into the “fogs” of atheism and skepticism. For Shinn, the rejection of God’s appointed means of human knowledge was nothing less than the atheism and skepticism of associationism. The impassioned tone of the Essay reveals an intense concern to dispel the doubts of the reader and to discredit skepticism, a mood that had considerable provenance in early America. Since Shinn had substantial expe-

is especially untrustworthy because of the manner in which the appearances of a physical object, a table for example, change as we move. Hume concludes that this shows that we do not perceive the table but only the appearances and, therefore, are deceived by our senses, However, the change of appearances, Reid replies, must occur if we do see the table, and therefore rather than leading to the conclusion that we do not perceive the table, should confirm us in our original conviction that we perceive what our senses tell us we do.” Keith Lehrer, Thomas Reid (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 18.

See Shinn, Essay, 54.

Gauvreau states, “This Newtonian natural theology reached its height in the works of William Paley, whose Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy (1785) and Natural Theology (1802) not only formed the staple of the Cambridge University curriculum but were widely used in American colleges before 1825.” Gauvreau, “The Empire of Evangelicalism,” 235.

Shinn, Essay, 57.

“By the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century, the Enlightenment outlook became the dominant viewpoint of America’s most important intellectual, political and military leaders. . . . It is no exaggeration to say that the Enlightenment gave birth to America, at least in the sense that it provided the philosophical framework that informed and inspired the founders of indepen-
rience as a Methodist circuit rider and leader, his principal concern may have been to furnish arguments against the skepticism commonly encountered by Methodist preachers on their circuits. Because Shinn had been stationed in remote rural circuits early in his career, such intense concern may reveal how deeply imbedded skepticism had become in the minds of ordinary Americans.

However, his Essay does not seem to be directly addressed to common folk. Rather, the Essay was most likely written as an apologetical resource for Methodist ministers. This is apparent from the high regard the Essay accords to Wesley and Fletcher as well as other ‘divines’ widely read by Methodist ministers. Shinn appealed to the prejudices of his Methodist readers when he lumped together Christian philosophers and Methodist leaders who supported the traditional authority of the Bible over against the “enemies” of Christianity who doubted its truth. He named prominent scientists, philosophers, and divines as belonging to the “wisest and best” and overlooked the significant differences among them. Across the divide from this company of the faithful Shinn placed the enemies of the Bible—Hobbes, Bolingbroke, Gibbon, Hume, Voltaire, Paine, and Palmer—and stated that it was no wonder that the Bible could not withstand the test of their philosophy, since “earth and sea, animals and vegetable, the bodies and souls of men, and the very heavens themselves, could not withstand the test. We must have a revelation made up of nothing but ideas and impressions, before it will stand the test of the metaphysical philosophy.”

Repeated in the sermons of Methodist ministers, these arguments probably induced gales of laughter at the folly of idealism. Through the judicious application of ridicule and appeal to common sense, Shinn turned the Enlightenment’s critique of Christianity on its head and encouraged doubt and skepticism toward philosophical idealism and unbelief.

Most of the remainder of the Essay consists of a polemic against “antinomian divinity” (Calvinism) and includes an eloquent exposition of the moral government theory of the atonement. The Essay also addresses the suffering,
death, and eternal destiny of infants (a significant pastoral issue in early America), and concludes with a remarkable portrait of faith. This portrait pleads for a balanced Christian life that includes not only emotion, but also reason and intelligence. Shinn rejected feelings as “the standard of religion” since feelings alone could not regulate the Christian life, particularly with respect to morals. His analysis of emotionalism stemmed directly from his experience as a minister, especially with people who were dying in great pain. He aimed his sharpest critiques against rampant emotionalism, a common problem among early Methodist. Shinn displayed a remarkable balance in his portrait of the Christian life, provided insights from both the Enlightenment and the Evangelical Revival, and critiqued the former by the latter and the latter by the former. His Essay astutely and passionately addressed the theological issues and pastoral concerns of early Methodist ministers and provided them with resources to establish a faithful, biblical Christianity that was intellectually and emotionally satisfying in the republicanism of young America.


Shinn attributed excessive emotionalism to Christians “who would not think.” For further characterization see his Essay, 404.