Chapter X

*Arkangel* and the Death of God: A Nietzschean Critique of Technology’s Soteriological Scheme

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*Arkangel* (Season 4, Episode 2) is a premonitory tale about how helicopter parenting can easily get out of control—at least, at first glance. It taps into a parent’s real experience of carrying both immense love as well as an immense weight of responsibility for their child. Parents naturally desire to protect their child from the cruelties of the world—especially the kinds of cruelties they themselves experienced. Good parents protect their child’s vulnerabilities relative to the different stages of their development while also gradually opening them onto the world so they can grow into mature adulthood. Yet the healthy protective impulse parents have can often be preyed upon. Charlie Brooker himself shares his own experience with this vulnerability:

I once rang NHS Direct because I thought our first child had started crying with a different accent. Suddenly his cry was completely different, because little babies are very high pitched. But I didn’t know, and as a first time parent I was terrified something was going horribly wrong. And if you google anything, it tells you that it’s fatal.[[1]](#footnote-1)

From phone tracking to TV content controls, technology already provides a ready aid for parents to protect their children. Who would not want to take advantage of a device that will tell you when your child goes missing, protect her from frightening experiences, and restrict her access to harmful content? However, *Arkangel* displays how technology can exacerbate a normal parental concern into a neurosis. It can be a ready tool for parents to manipulate their children’s experience of the world in such a way that it denies them of their individual freedom and renders them ill-equipped to stand on their own feet in the world.

Beyond a warning to parents, there is another perspective presented in *Arkangel*, a “double perspective,” as special director, Jodie Foster calls it.[[2]](#footnote-2) *Arkangel* is at once the mother’s story and the daughter’s story. By centralizing the daughter’s perspective, however, we see a broader analogy of what it is like to live under a system enforced by what is really just human hands. We see a system designed to restrict life, or to provide restricted access to life, and we witness how it makes those under it weak and repressed. The daughter’s experience of life controlled by the Arkangel device portrays exactly what Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th century philosopher, argued is problematic about religion, Christianity in particular.

In this essay, we analyze *Arkangel* alongside Nietzsche’s critique of religion. After providing an overview of his critique, we argue that the episode demonstrates how a world enframed by technology itself ends up being just as decadent, or just as pathological, repressive, corrupt, anti-life, and *unredemptive* as Nietzsche accuses Christianity of being. Nietzsche thought, at one point, that science and technology might provide a non-metaphysical or non-theological solution to what he calls our “metaphysical need.” However, *Arkangel* shows how technology does not overcome problems of idolatrous forms of religion and can be just another tool for manipulation that produces the same kinds of pathologies. Nietzsche insists that the only way to overcome religion as an oppressive system is to “philosophize with a hammer,” or to deconstruct its idolatrous strictures and the “all too human” forces behind it. Ultimately, this deconstruction requires declaring “the death of God.” In *Arkangel*, we see a daughter, Sara (Brenna Harding), take up this same sort of solution to gain her freedom from the Arkangel technology. Overcoming the oppressive ‘system’ ultimately requires declaring the ‘death’ of her mother, or at least the system of parental control that technology gave her. We conclude by considering Merold Westphal’s recommendation for Christians to read Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity for Lent, perhaps even alongside a viewing of *Arkangel*. Doing so invites us to a place of self-examination. It prompts us to ask how we might be more beholden to dead religion and human idolatry than genuine faith.

Nietzsche’s Critique of Religion

Nietzsche is perhaps most famous (or infamous) for his Parable of the Madman, in which a distraught man runs from town to town looking for God. He is repeatedly mocked by groups of men who disbelieve in God, and the madman repeats his question—“Where is God?”—before providing his own answer: “I’ll tell you! We have killed him—you and I!” The bystanders are disinterested. No matter how loudly and persistently the crier exclaims the news, he cannot convince the audience of its import.

The death of God is, of course, not a literal death; it is not even the end of popular academic belief in God which, as Nietzsche illustrates in the parable, had happened quite a while ago. The madman should be understood as giving an announcement and a prediction: he is announcing first that belief in the Christian tradition has become “unbelievable” because it is no longer being enforced, socially or by the state, as the shared foundation for a civilized society. In essence, Nietzsche reads the mass acceptance of Christianity as a product of state and social coercion giving the tradition the veneer of plausibility. Given the availability of popular alternative foundations for such a society—e.g. science, innovation, and the enlightenment belief in the fated upward progress of humanity—Nietzsche predicts the steep decline of European Christianity. But though the effects of this decline will be difficult to notice in the moment, he predicts that it will have a profound (potentially cataclysmic) effect on society because the “entire European morality” was built upon Christianity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Looking beneath the surface of “religion,” especially the Christian religion, Nietzsche argues that it originates in an all-too-human attempt for power and control. Like firemen who light fires that they then must put out, or advertisers who stoke a desire in someone so they will then buy their product, religious leaders have created a “need” in people to deal with the problem of sin, pain, and death, and they then offer Christianity as a solution to these problems.[[4]](#footnote-4) Hence, what he identifies is the problematic *origin* of belief. This origin is not properly rational, as many try to make it seem, but is rather a product of manipulation and self-deception. God, he argues, is a convenient concept and means of control.

Not only is the origin of Christian belief suspect, but the consequences of it are as well. In particular, Christianity straps believers with a sense of guilt and self-loathing over their own sinfulness, and it demands a life of self-sacrifice and selflessness that Nietzsche insists makes them physically and psychologically unhealthy. Christian morality is life-suppressing, and in that regard life-denying, or nihilisitc.

European Rationalism, Human Nature, and Slave Morality

Nietzsche declares that “the greatest recent event—that ‘God is dead’; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable—is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe.”[[5]](#footnote-5) For him, an entire transvaluation of values is necessary, not only because “God is dead” and the lingering shadows of Christianity will soon be rendered unconvincing, but also because he viewed such European morality—the product of enlightenment rationality—as harmful to humanity. Specifically, in early works like *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche details his vision of the emergence of Greek tragedy in the Iron Age and early Classical period. In these epics, the possession, or lack, of noble class virtues is the marker of the worth of a person. Iron Age virtue was characterized by such features as strength, happiness, freedom, victoriousness, etc. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, this picture of virtue is equated with two Greek gods: Dionysus, who represents a reality marked by chaos, passion, and opaqueness, and Apollo, who represents a reality marked by order, objectivity, and clarity. Nietzsche argues that the picture of life handed to us by the ethic of the Greek tragedies is one of continual conflict between the Dionysian spirit and the Apollonian spirit where each brings balance to the other. This picture of “noble morality” was slowly replaced, beginning with Socrates’ insistence that virtue was the entirely internal possession of a stalwart spirit that loves the Good.[[6]](#footnote-6) That is, Nietzsche sees Socrates as an initiator of the idea that virtue is accessible to all people at all times—external circumstances are powerless to affect the truly virtuous.[[7]](#footnote-7) This rejection of the virtues of nobility finds a substitute in a new moral dichotomy: good vs. bad is replaced by a battle of good vs. evil, in a moral schema that Nietzsche will immortalize with the moniker “slave morality.” In slave morality, the old paradigm of good and bad are reversed—first with Socrates, in his insistence that true human nature was rational and that goodness was unaffected by physical conditions, and culminating with Jesus Christ and the Christian teaching of self-sacrifice and obedience in the midst of suffering.

Nietzsche’s Christ

It is no secret that of all religions, Nietzsche spends the most time engaged in a full-frontal assault on Christianity. In some ways, Nietzsche views Jesus Christ himself as antithetical to what Christianity would later become (largely, he argues, under the direction of St. Paul). He argues that, rather than “genius” or “hero”—the way Nietzsche thinks Christ is portrayed in the modern age—Jesus Christ embodies the character of an “idiot.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This is a term that is often read as a reference to Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (1869)—a novel about a child prince named Mishkin who is extremely meek and sensitive to any amount of suffering.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mishkin feels everything so deeply that he is in constant emotional turmoil and tends to psychologically withdraw to a place of mental and spiritual tranquility. That is to say, Nietzsche does not argue that Jesus Christ was unintelligent or obtuse; rather, he reads the character of Christ as pursuing something similar to Buddhist enlightenment, and that both Christianity and Buddhism are “nihilistic” religions which involve a death of the self. For the Buddhist this is explicit: Buddhist metaphysics posits the self as an illusion. Enlightenment is, therefore, achieved by becoming unburdened and losing the illusion of the “self.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Nietzsche understood the origin of Christianity as bearing a similarly nihilistic message both in its insistence that Christians must put to death the “old self” and in what he saw as the escapist mindset of Christ (Col 3.5–11). Nietzsche calls this the “problem of the psychology of the redeemer,” according to which there is “an instinct of hatred for every reality, as a flight into the ‘unimaginable,’ into the ‘inconceivable,’ as an aversion to every formula, to every concept of space and time, to everything solid, to every custom, institution, church, as a being-at-home in a world that has broken off contact with every type of reality, a world that has become completely internal, a ‘real’ eternal world.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Hence, Christianity takes us out of life and away from reality, making life a filtered, suppressed, and largely irrational existence.

Given this psychology, the Madman from Nietzsche’s parable predicts that the effects of the death of God will be slow; “shadows” of God will for a time prop up the illusion that God still exists simply because we do not yet know how to cope in a world without him. “After Buddha was dead,” Nietzsche writes, “they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow.”[[12]](#footnote-12) These “shadows” he speaks of are related, broadly speaking, to the metaphysical nature of the enlightened rationalists’s theories of morality and goodness. Although Nietzsche acknowledges that European rationalism has largely sought to ground moral facts apart from God, he considers the continued reliance on such transcendental posits as “the moral law” to be the sorts of “shadows” that the death of God will, in time, render just as absurd as the idea of God itself. And as these shadows fade and become less plausible for grounding near-universal ideas of goodness, rightness, and meaning, mankind will be forced to either give up in despair or engage in a radical “transvaluation of values.” They will have to figure out how to live on their own.

What would such a transvaluation of values look like? Bluntly, it would look immoral. Nietzsche is often labeled an “immoralist” for this very reason—he argues that we must take a philosophical “hammer” to what we once considered foundational assumptions of right and wrong, good and evil. We must do this because the foundation we are relying on is itself a swiftly-fading shadow, and if we cannot get our philosophical feet on more solid ground then we will have nothing at all to stand on. Additionally, as Nietzsche sees it, our current foundation is an exceptionally unhealthy, life-denying one. Nietzsche focuses on this consequence of our current situation because he sees the true role of the philosopher as a kind of physician with an eye toward human health. And in order to attain “philosophical health” we must, as Charlie Huenemann puts it, “suffer loss of trust in hallowed ideals, even those in which we thought we had found our humanity.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In the preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

I am still waiting for a philosophical physician in the exceptional sense of that word—one who has to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity—to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As Nietzsche sees it, the very idea of ‘truth’ as understood by enlightenment rationality—disconnected from the physical world, unchanging through the ages—ushered life-denying, sickening aspects into philosophy in its insistence that we obey these truths or treat them as authoritative. Our core commitments and worldviews, he argues, are making us profoundly sick, and so uprooting, examining, and replacing our values is an imperative if we want to become healthy. Doing the work of transvaluation requires courage, but the results, he argues, are liberating:

At that time it may finally happen that, under the sudden illumination of a still stressful, still changeable health the free, ever freer spirit begins to unveil the riddle of that great liberation which had until then waited dark, questionable, almost untouchable in his memory. If he has for long hardly dared to ask himself: ‘why so apart? so alone? Renouncing everything I once reverenced? renouncing reverence itself? Why this hardness, this suspiciousness, this hatred for your own virtues?’—now he dares to ask it aloud and hears in reply something like an answer. ‘You shall become master over yourself, master also over your virtues. Formerly *they* were your masters; but they must be only your instruments beside other instruments. You shall get control over your For and Against and learn how to display first one and then the other in accordance with your higher goal.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Technology and the “Metaphysical Need”

Nietzsche’s teacher, Arthur Schopenhauer, sought to defend religion by pointing the human “need for metaphysics.”[[16]](#footnote-16) However, Nietzsche turned what Schopenhauer used as a defense of Christianity into a critique of Christianity, and of metaphysics more generally. According to Schopenhauer, the universality of religion, evidenced by “temples and churches, pagodas and mosques, in all countries and ages, in their splendor and spaciousness, testify to man’s need for metaphysics.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Religion is simply “popular metaphysics,” or metaphysics for children rather than adults. Metaphysics is “so-called knowledge that goes beyond nature or the given phenomenal appearance of things, in order to give information about that by which, in some sense or other, this nature is conditioned.”[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, metaphysics is the study of the supra-natural, that which is beyond (or behind) mere appearance and makes the world what it is. Not everyone can understand metaphysics proper, since that is a very advanced enterprise, but on the popular level metaphysics manifests simply as religion. Religion is “for the great majority of people who are not capable of thinking but only of believing, and are susceptible not to arguments, but only to authority.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

What is common to all human beings is a unique awareness of their own existence and the inevitability of their death. This awareness, however, is presented as a problem by religion (and metaphysics) that must be overcome, or to which there must be satisfactory answers. Hence, the first and most essential function of religion (as well as metaphysics) is to deny the finality of death, or at least provide consolation for it.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, religion (and metaphysics) must provide standards of virtue and systems of morality that guide people through life.[[21]](#footnote-21) Hence, religion and metaphysics all operate on the basis of a “metaphysical need” people have in order to cope with their own existence by gaining access to something beyond it.

Whereas Schopenhauer simply observed this “metaphysical need,” Nietzsche questioned its legitimacy, especially the health of looking to religion and metaphysics to overcome it. As he sees it, the metaphysical need is simultaneously fed and ‘narcoticized’ by religion. As we discussed above, Nietzsche critiques Christianity for telling human beings they are sinful and in need of salvation, thereby saddling them with perpetuating guilt, depression, and fear. Much like treating a broken leg with high levels of pain medicine rather than actually resetting the bone, Nietzsche insists that religion narcoticizes genuine human ills by interpreting them in ways that make the suffering seem good or inherently redemptive. “The more a man inclines towards reinterpetation,” Nietzsche argues, “the less attention he will give to the cause of the ill and to doing away with it.”[[22]](#footnote-22) In his text *Human, All Too Human,* his former romanticism is jettisoned in favor of a quest for naturalistic and materialist solutions to overcome this need. In other words, he looks for a scientific solution to a ‘religious’ problem.

It would be impossible to give a single “Nietzschean” view of science and the advancement of technology. Like much of Nietzsche’s thought, his views on science and technology went through multiple shifts as his influences changed. Early Nietzsche, as discussed above, admired the virtues displayed in the Greek tragedies, and saw the prospect of a highly-technological future as indicating a reliance on science and human reason. Such a future, then, belied the continued caving-in to “Socratism,” or the belief that the human essence was to employ dispassionate reason in the pursuit of truth. In fact, anticipating (if not inspiring) future critiques of technology, Nietzsche writes:

Mankind mercilessly employs every individual as material for heating its great machines: but what then is the purpose of the machines if all individuals (that is to say mankind) are of no other use than as material for maintaining them? Machines that are an end in themselves—is that the *umana commedia*?[[23]](#footnote-23)

But Nietzsche’s view does not remain quite so disdainful of the prospects of a highly-technologized future. Following a falling-out with his close friend and hero Richard Wagner, the composer whose art inspired Nietzsche’s thoughts on Greek tragedy and human nature, Nietzsche’s work began to become more positivist, likely under the influence of his friend and housemate Paul Ree, and his attitude toward scientific and technological advancements took on a bit more hopeful curiosity. Rather than denying life, he began to think that science could just be the way to advance the human spirit deeper into it. In the same work, displaying vividly his intellectual dissonance toward science, Nietzsche writes, “Modern science, has as its goal: as little pain as possible, as long life as possible—thus a kind of eternal bliss, though a very modest kind in comparison with the promises of the religions.”[[24]](#footnote-24) By taking on a truly scientific mode of thought we finally can jettison theological grand-narratives, dogmas, or pious interpretations for this-worldly solutions to human problems, most significantly, the problem of pain and death. Technological advances quite literally prolong life and protect us from various kinds of suffering. Thus, as Julian Young says, “Nietzsche’s position now seems to be that we should give up ‘narcoticizing’ human ills with art and religion since science is well on the way to ‘abolishing the causes of those ills.’” Science overcomes religion by inoculating the “metaphysical need” through naturalistic, non-metaphysical solutions.

The “metaphysical need” for a solution to the problem of pain and death is a driving force behind the technology of *Arkangel*. As the episode demonstrates, this “need” can be felt not only on behalf of oneself, but perhaps even most bitingly on behalf of one’s child. While some parents might look to religion to ease their parental concern and to provide a means of control over the behavior of their children, Marie (Rosemarie DeWitt), the mother in *Arkangel*, appeals to scientific solution—a technological device. Looking at its effects on Sara, however, we see that this technology is just as anti-life and pathological as Nietzsche takes religion—Christianity in particular—to be. The story of *Arkangel* effectively disappoints Nietzsche’s hopes in science to overcome religion by showing how technology remains ensconced in the same soteriological scheme.

The Pathologies of *Arkangel*

In the opening scene of *Arkangel*, we see a pregnant Marie undergoing a C-section. When the baby is delivered and the umbilical cord is cut, there is a forbidding moment of silence before the newborn finally begins breathing regularly on her own. The mother sighs with relief as her daughter, Sara, is placed in her arms. Nevertheless, the trauma of the moment and the fear of loss remain with her. We soon discover that Marie is a single mother, one who is particularly nervous about facing the challenges of parenting on her own.

A few years later, after a terrifying incident at the park in which Sara (Aniya Hodge), wandered off, Marie decides to participate in a free trial for a kind of advanced chip technology called Arkangel. The technology allows parents to monitor their child’s whereabouts and even their experiences in order to protect them. “We are getting feedback on which features our customers use most in the real world. Response so far is just incredible. The sense of security, peace of mind. I mean the stories we’ve been hearing, they’re truly inspirational,” the clinician says to Marie. While distracting Sara with cartoons, the clinician inserts a chip into the side of her head using a needle. The clinician then opens up a box with a tablet inside and proceeds to give Marie a tutorial of all the features the device offers. The program gives her access to Sara’s current location (and the ability to notify law-enforcement if she ever goes missing). It displays her vitals and vitamin levels. It even provides an optic feed so she can see on the screen exactly what Sara is seeing, and it can also limit the content of what Sara sees through the “parental controls.” “If she witnesses something that causes her cortisol levels to rise, like stress,” the clinician explains, “it can kind of paint out whatever’s triggering it.” To demonstrate, she changes the channel on the screen that Sarah is watching from cartoons to a soldier shooting a gun (Raiman [Madeline Brewer] from *Men Against Fire* [Season 3, Episode 5]). Marie instantly panics over the content her child is seeing. “It’s O.K.,” the clinician says, “Look. See, the imagery causes a cortisol spike, and this [turns filter on] is what she sees and hears.” On the optic feed we see the image of the soldier firing her gun is blotted out and the sound is muffled. Sara seems to be unphased. Marie seems to be apprehensive about this particular feature, but the clinician ensures her that it is optional and there only if she needs it.

In the coming months, the device proves not just to be helpful for the single mother parenting alone, but it also becomes a way for her to play with her daughter. As Sara toddles around the house looking for her mom, Marie sits upstairs in a closet watching her optic feed on the tablet, giggling softly with delight. The feature Marie initially felt uneasy about later presented itself a fun way to play hide and seek with her daughter. It seemed to be entirely harmless and quite useful.

Later, when Marie is walking Sara to the park in a stroller, they pass by a dog barking ferociously at them from behind a fence. Not wanting her daughter to be afraid, Marie decides to try out the content control feature. Through the optic feed, she sees the dog is blurred from Sara’s vision and the bark is muffled.

The device makes itself even more valuable when Marie is at work and she leaves Sara with her father. Turning on the device, she sees through the optic feed that her father is lying on the ground. In order to see what is happening, however, she has to turn off the content filter. As soon as she does, she recognizes that he is having a heart attack. She races back home and is able to get her father to the hospital in time.

As Sara grows up, the Arkangel device begins to chafe. A classmate of Sara’s (Sarah Abbot) attempts to show her violent pornography on an electronic device, which Sara cannot see due to Arkangel’s protective effects. With piqued curiosity, Sara later pricks her fingers, but the controls blur her ability to see her own blood. Innocent of what she cannot see, she begins sketching graphic violent images. At the urging of a child psychologist, Marie decides to have the Arkangel protective features disabled.

Sara is now able to see life, in all of its horror and its glory. She begins adjusting to the newly unveiled world of violence, grief, and pleasure. Whereas before she was sheltered by the technology, Sara now learns how to cope with the real world and also how enjoy it. She gradually grows unafraid of the barking dog, not because something blocked her ability to be stressed by it, but because she is able to overcome her fear on her own. She enjoys friendships, parties, music, movies, and a relatively normal teenage life alongside her peers. Meanwhile, Marie keeps the Arkangel device packed away with the parental controls disabled. Having learned her lesson earlier, she eschews this level of monitoring, but the device is still accessible should she need it. This all comes to a head on the (inevitable) night that Sara is out past her curfew. Sick with anxiety, but not wanting to annoy her daughter, Marie dusts off the Arkangel monitoring tablet and is shocked to see Sara having sex and using drugs with a classmate.

Shaken by her discovery of Sara’s secret life, Marie tracks down her daughter’s classmate/lover/drug dealer and threateningly insists he stay away from Sara. Perhaps even more brazenly, Marie slips a morning after pill into Sara’s breakfast smoothie, causing her to become sick and vomit while at school. Sara discovers, through the school nurse, that she had been made sick by an emergency contraceptive, and she later finds evidence that her mother had slipped her the drug.

Sara confronts Marie, who she finds upstairs with the Arkangel tablet in hand. As she wrests the device from her, Sara’s stress filter is reactivated, which causes whatever is triggering her stress to be blurred out. Sara swings at her mother in anger, though she is unable to see the actual physical violence she is inflicting on her. Sara beats Marie with the tablet until she is unconscious and the tablet is shattered. When the device dies the stress filter instantly deactivates. Sara is free of Arkangel. With her mother lying unconscious on the floor, she immediately leaves the home. In the final scene we see Sara flagging down a truck driving by her house. Meanwhile, her mother regains consciousness and follows after her, calling out her name in the street. As far as Sara was concerned, her mother—more importantly, the device her mother used to control her—was dead.

The Death of the Mother

While the episode is most obviously a warning against helicopter parenting, it is not hard to identify Nietzschean resonances in the story it tells. The looming Mother-figure in *Arkangel* asserts the same kind of control that Nietzsche identifies in metaphysical schemes and religious systems. The origin of these systems, when traced back, is an all-too-human need to regulate and manage others. Whether out of a sinister scheme for domination or out of a desire for what one might take as the “best interest” of the other, the pathological consequences of such systems are the same. They keep people bound in such a way that they have restricted access to life and, thereby, grow weak, sickly, and timid. They are sheltered rather than strong, held back rather than propelled forward. Beneath Sara’s repression was nothing but a man-made device in the hands of a fearful mother. It was, in the end, finite and breakable, not infinite and eternal. The same is true, Nietzsche thinks, for metaphysio-religious schemes. The way to overcome these systems is to declare their death: to uncover the traces of their influence, to deconstruct them by exposing the power, control, and fear as their true source rather than a universal, objective law, and to courageously begin to move forward in life without them.

The device—a techno-physical maternal grotesque—does not lose its suffocating grip over Sara until it is destroyed in its entirety. Nietzsche, again attacking the religious metaphysic, echoes a similar sentiment: “‘Reason’ in language: oh, what a deceptive old woman this is! I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Getting past created metaphysical needs that cannot be met requires getting rid of the ‘corpse’ of God, or destroying all notions of objective truth or order in the universe that, beneath the surface, are really just man-made. Nietzsche here displays his most positivist leanings, coming to view even the apparent intrinsic structure and rationality of language as illusory, a phantom pattern that we mistake for a metaphysical truth. We are presented in *The Twilight of the Idols*, especially, with a view of all metaphysics as deeply religious in the sense that it presents a view of reality that is unfalsifiable and fully external to our minds and senses. The subtitle, “How to Philosophize with a Hammer,” vividly conveys that comforting metaphysics must be destroyed if we are to rid ourselves of the existential needs which warp and sicken us. *Arkangel* dramatizes this same idea. Even with the stress reduction feature switched off, and the monitoring tablet tucked away, Sara is never fully free from the panopticon of Arkangel until the entire device is shattered irreparably. While it is simply left unused, its ‘shadow’ still looms by virtue of the fact that it is readily available to the mother should she need it. In the final scene, we see Sara grabbing on to her new-found freedom with gusto, leaving behind her home, the shattered device, and her badly-injured mother as she drives off with a stranger into her own future. Nietzsche would say that as a free spirit she finally has control over her “For and Against,” and learns how to display first one and then the other in accordance with her higher goal.[[26]](#footnote-26)

*Arkangel* for Lent

As a Master of Suspicion, Nietzsche presents a particularly disturbing challenge to Christians, yet it is one with which we are (or should be) familiar. As Merold Westphal argues, there is a profound parallel in the kind of critique of religion in Nietzsche and the critique of religion found in Christian scripture as well as Church tradition. He writes:

Faith as fraud? Devotion as deception? These are strong charges, but modern atheism is not the first to make them. What about Amos, whose God cannot stand the music offered in his praise (Amos 5:23)? What about Isaiah (Second or Third), for whom “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isa. 64:6)? And what about Jesus, who considers the most pious people of his day “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27) and the temple run by the chief priests a “den of robbers” (Mark 11:17)? We need only recall Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees, Paul’s critique of works righteousness, James’ critique of cheap grace, and the Old Testament prophetic critiques on which these are based to be reminded that biblical faith has built into it a powerful polemic against certain kinds of religion, even if they are practiced in the name of the one true God.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Long before Nietzsche called out self-promoting piety and the idolatrous worship of a god who looks an awful lot like our own projections and projects, the Old Testament prophets, Jesus in the Gospels, the New Testament writers, and even the Church fathers and reformers like Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Soren Kierkegaard told us the painful truth about ourselves. They identified how instrumental religion, or “the piety that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction,”[[28]](#footnote-28) is not “true and undefiled religion,” and it cannot be corrected by appeals to metaphysical orthodoxy and stricter enforcement to the prevailing moral order. In their unique ways, they call Christians to face the self-deception that hides our real operative motives (both individual and collective) and to ask “In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?”[[29]](#footnote-29) They challenge us to take an honest look at the yokes handed out in the name of God. What we may find is that the God we worship is the validator of our virtues and the hero of our battles. The God of instrumental religion is not a living God but a dead God—it is an idol of our own making designed to serve our purposes.

We see vast differences in the motivations behind different atheistic thinkers. There are skeptical atheists who disbelieve (or withhold belief) in the existence of God due to a lack of substantial evidence. There are suspicious atheists who see the question of the *existence* of God as subordinate to the question of what is done in the *name* of God. In particular, they are concerned with the nature of religious life, not just its propositional content. Skeptical atheists question the truth of Christianity on evidential or logical grounds, suspicious atheists question the truth of Christianity by questioning its goodness. Instead of addressing a religious theory directly, they address it indirectly by unearthing what is beneath religious practices, and by ferreting out hidden hypocrisy.

Christians should not evade this kind of suspicious evaluation, but should welcome it. Such a practice is consistent with the belief in original sin, and it takes seriously the way sin proliferates by hiding in the shelter of darkness. Suspicious evaluation can be undertaken in the spirit of the psalmist, who says “Search me, God and know my heart; Put me to the test and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there is *any* hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (Ps 139.23–24 NIV; emphasis added), or of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews who says to “encourage one another every day, as long as it is *still* called ‘today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3.13 NIV; emphasis added). It involves allowing Jesus’s words in the Gospels to interrogate us, to ask whether we are picking up our crosses or seeking prestigious positions in the Kingdom (Mk 10.32–45). It forces us to ask if we are worshipping a doctrinal system, a socio-political order, or a living God.

It is for these reasons that Westphal recommends reading Nietzsche as a *lenten* practice, or a practice of humble examination and repentance before God. Nietzsche’s gaze of suspicion can be used in the service of faith rather than unbelief, and in fact can be used to purify our faith so that it reflects the true as well as the good and the beautiful. “When we have eliminated the logs of self-deception from the theory and practice of our own piety,” Westphal says, “then we can seek to correct the specks of error in [Nietzsche] (Matt. 7:1-5). Perhaps, we may hope, there will no longer be the need to do so, our lives having already refuted them more effectively than our arguments ever could.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

While Sara destroys the Arkangel device and becomes free from its oppressive scheme, it is worth noting that Sara’s mother herself does not actually die. The story leaves us to imagine what the future might hold. Sara may maintain separation from her mother for the rest of her life in order to be her own ‘free spirit.’ Alternatively, Sara’s ‘freedom’ may then open up the possibility of a new kind of relationship with her mother, one that is not mediated by a human-made device. Likewise, perhaps reading Nietzsche does not lead us to a life of no religion, but to a life of better religion.

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1. C.f. Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones with Jason Arnopp, *Inside Black Mirror* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2018), 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C.f. Inside Black Mirror, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001),199. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nietzsche, *The Gay* Science, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Plato, *Plato: Complete Works/Apology*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot,* trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Books, 2004 [1869]). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. S. Nikāya, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications), 2000, S III.66–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Charlie Huenemann, “Nietzschean Health and the Inherent Pathology of Christianity,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2010): 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See the chapter titled “On Man’s Need for Metaphysics” in Arthur Schopenhaur, *The World as Will and Representation* vol. II (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 160–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 463. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* 585. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 10–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12. This statement is a paraphrase from Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vol. 2: F–K, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)