

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What does the author mean by the term *technological availability*? What specific values does this concept embody?
2. What is the vision of the “good life” that our modern technological society offers us? Why does the author question the goodness of this way of life?
3. What are the main differences between what Strong calls “things” and what he calls “devices”? What values do we sacrifice when we choose the device paradigm over engagement with things?

## KEYWORDS

alienation, commodification, environmental ethics, heating systems, television, wilderness

### THE UNDERLYING ETHIC OF TECHNOLOGY

Some have argued that we live in an invisible iron cage. Indeed, technological forces are shaping people’s lives in ways that they have little or no control over, especially if the basic framework of technology goes unchallenged; but, as Charles Taylor points out, the conquest of nature had a benevolent point to it. It was to serve humanity. So, he finds that, along with other forces, there are moral forces of work here shaping our lives. We live neither in an iron cage nor in an arena of unconstrained choice; we inhabit a possibility space where some moral choices are being made. There is a kind of ethical appeal to not letting our resources go to waste. So what ethical forces might be called upon to reform technology in a deep way? How should we understand the basic choice we face? For developing what I call the vision and underlying ethic of technology, I will draw heavily upon Albert Borgmann’s theory of technology, the best account of the character of the technological culture we have so far. Then we will use this vision of technology to show that the concerns of environmental ethics and people’s better concerns for nature generally will be subverted by technology unless we as a culture come to grips with the irony of this vision and begin to make a fundamentally different choice, that is, choose things over consumption.

### MAKING THE APPEAL OF TECHNOLOGY INTELLIGIBLE: THE PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY

Neither Heidegger nor Thoreau makes clear what it is about technology that is attractive to people. Claiming that we delight in the exercise of power seems correct enough when we think of the enormous amount of power we wield with technology, yet this view does not address our more intelligible motives and, therefore, does not really address many of the proponents of technology without trivializing their concerns. In one way or another, most of us, if not all, see technology as good. What is at the heart of our petty homocentrism? What good is technology?

Typically people articulate what good technology is when they say that something is better or improved and demonstrate that “that’s progress.” Advertisements are continually pointing out what is better about the product advertised, even if the chief “advantage” is two for the price of one. Although they may well dupe us, these advertisements normally appeal to standards that at least on a deep and general level are already in place and widely shared in consumer culture. We hear everywhere around us, not just in advertisements, what better is. “It means less work.” “It’s more comfortable.” “It’s convenient.” “It’s healthier.” “It’s faster and more productive.” “It’s less of a hassle.” “Sleeker looks better.” “It’s lighter.” “It doesn’t get in your way.” “You don’t