

“THE MACHINE STOPS”

BY E. M. FORSTER

Background on the Selection

This reading is a 1909 short story by E. M. Forster (1879–1970) with a foreword by Dan Russ. The topic of the reading is technology and our dependence on it, one of the themes of the Trinity Forum curriculum, *Children of Prometheus* (2006), which Dr. Russ also edited.

Group Discussion Questions

1 How do you react to the story? What is the mood that Forster evokes? Do you feel uncomfortable discussing the limitations of technology? If so, why do you think that is?

2 Why is Vashti shocked when her son Kuno says something that implies unhappiness with the Machine? What does he want? Why is he not satisfied with the experience he has?

3 Why does Vashti dislike the idea of “seeing the horrible brown earth”? Is this like the tendency of some modern people to live in role playing games? Does the thought of downloading your brain into a cyborg or a data bank hold any appeal for you? Why or why not?

4 How close did Forster hit the mark in his imagining a world where humans worship their machines? Do humans need a sense of ritual like that Vashti follows with the Book of the Machine? Do you see any parallels in today’s society? Can you imagine a parallel utopian or dystopian world where technology has been marginalized?

5 Consider Vashti’s reflection on the failure of the Machine to preserve *nuances* of human communication. Is Forster right that we settle too easily for “good enough”? Can you think of technologies where something important gets “lost in translation”? Is the fault only a lack of sophistication in a technology? Is there something deeper?

6 Consider Vashti's day-to-day responses—loneliness, irritation, inertia. Does she strike you as fully human? Can you relate to her experience? Dr. Russ suggests that technologies already present—like air travel and cell phones—have dehumanizing tendencies. Is he correct? Which ones does Forster predict correctly? Which ones does he miss? How do you respond to those tendencies? How do you handle the various demands on your attention from e-mail, television, telephone, and so many other sources? Is travel worthwhile?

7 Forster implies that one of the consequences of his imagined society is a lack of ideas. What is he saying?

8 Forster says that “thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over.” If this was the goal of science during his time, what drives the makers of technology today? Is this sameness still a goal or a necessary by-product? Where does the human fit into such a vision?

9 Do you understand the technologies on which you depend? Can you make necessary repairs when something breaks down? If not, what does that imply? Can we ever really abandon a technology? Should we? What can we do to avoid the extreme level of dependence that Forster envisions?

10 How dangerous, if at all, is our increasing dependence on technology? How much technology is too much? How can we maintain a balance of appreciating innovations while recognizing and addressing the challenges they present? Why is the answer not “end technology and head for the mountains?”

Further Reading

- *Children of Prometheus: Technology and the Good Life*, The Trinity Forum (2006).
- An extensive reading list for technology is available online at the Trinity Forum's website, including such recommendations as Wendell Berry's *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Counterpoint 2000) and Neil Postman's *Technopoly* (Vintage 1992).