Sanjay Jagadeesh

English 1

Summary 1 Draft 1

09/26/24

In “Passengers,” the first chapter of his book *The Glass Cage*, Nicholas Carr illustrates the increasing presence of automation past their perceived limits and the resulting changes in work delegation between humans and AI, warning that the passiveness taken upon by humans leads to a sense of overdependence and miswanting, meaning that we need to make ethical choices about our use of and reliance upon automation.

Carr begins by metaphorically describing his feeling of pride when learning to drive a manual transmission and his feelings of boredom and resentment when an automatic transmission took over what had previously been his job (driving a car), assigning him a passive role. What he had initially perceived as freedom quickly turned into a limitation of his being.

Carr then shifts his focus to Google’s new self-driving car, emphasizing how it is a breakthrough in not only transportation but also in automation. He argues that despite the challenges self-driving cars will face, such as technical challenges or legal questions, they have changed the world of automation. As Carr summarizes, “We’re not so much controlling our cars as sending electronic inputs to the computers that control them” (Carr 8). He argues that in the coming years we will see more responsibilities shift from humans to automation, citing that luxury car makers are already using advanced technology and that Tesla Motors are developing an autopilot.

This brings Carr to the limits of automation. He asserts that Google’s driverless car has led to a loss of distinction between explicit knowledge (knowledge that can be written down as a series of steps) and tacit knowledge (knowledge that people use without thinking about it), resetting the boundary between humans and computers. This, Carr emphasizes, does not mean that computers are becoming human but that they are able to use explicit knowledge at superhuman speed to accomplish tacit tasks, sometimes even outperforming people. Carr highlights that what’s ineffable to us is effable to a computer (many of the talents considered to be human can be done by computers), maintaining that this advancement is changing the way work is performed.

Carr then focuses on our dependency on computers. He believes that due to the proliferation of technology, we have become overly dependent on software for many of our daily tasks, declaring that “The computer is becoming our all-purpose took for navigating, manipulating, and understanding the world, in both its physical and its social manifestations” (Carr 12). Though this may be disconcerting, Carr emphasizes that in general, we welcome (and show off) technology due the magical effect we feel whenever software automates our tasks. This feeling of awe, however, can also be a feeling of apprehensiveness, as an increase in automation can led to an increased feeling of underutilization in people.

Carr then brings up the topic of the value of labor and leisure, claiming that, “The trouble with automation is that it often gives us what we don’t need at the cost of what we do” (Carr 14). He uses Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s 1990 book *Flow* to discuss “the paradox of work”, where people don’t like being at work even though they feel happier and more fulfilled there, showing that we are terrible at perceiving what activities will fulfill us and which ones will leave us discontented (we can’t judge psychic consequences accurately). Carr summarizes this paradox as “*miswanting*”, where we desire what we don’t want and want what we don’t desire. As psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson have observed, we tend to overvalue leisure and undervalue work, forever wanting badly. Carr then highlights the importance of achieving Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow (where we become so immersed in our work where we tune out our distractions, anxieties, and worries). Instead of embracing work to achieve flow, however, we shun challenges and want leisure, sentencing ourselves to idleness.

Carr concludes his argument by discussing the unintended consequences of automation. He reasons that we are dependent on automation due to its ability to increase our leisure in both our professional and private lives. This, however, has the unintended consequence of narrowing our responsibilities to the point where we become passive. As Carr comments, “All to often, automation frees us from which makes us feel free” (Carr 17). Despite this, Carr is quick to note that automation is not bad due to its benefits (such as the potential to increase both efficiency and productivity). The problem lies in our incapability to limit our dependence on automation, possibly because the costs of automation (such as an erosion of effort or a degradation of skills) are harder to pin down. Carr concludes that the decisions we make regarding automation are ethical ones defining our lives and what it means to be human.