'Ethical AI' could have thwarted deadly crash

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Who is to blame for the horrific deaths of 150 passengers aboard Germanwings 9525? The obvious answer — co-pilot Andreas Lubitz, and no one else — would appear to be a plausible reply. Unfortunately, the answer is dead wrong.

Even if Lubitz acted alone and with cold-blooded premeditation, there was another cause: The absence of artificial intelligence that has the power to prevent overtly immoral acts. Those who have long retarded, if not outright prevented, the deployment of such "robot-ethics" technology, share some substantive blame.

Moreover, if the next such mass-murder attempt by a pilot isn't thwarted, such obstructionist Luddites will have outright blood on their hands.

As I write this, there are no doubt people savoring the dream of attaining the "glory" of causing such a crash, and many of these malevolent minds are willing and able to be "quiet sleepers" while they bide their time and pass innocuously through all the training and tests that produce pilots who will, one fateful day, be in position to seize the controls and pulverize a jet filled with innocents forced to watch in horror as their ends inexorably approach.

Is such "ethical AI" technology available? Absolutely.

Consider the circumstances:

A man who can, with today's machine-vision technology, be instantly identified as the captain of 9525 desperately attempts to re-enter the cockpit — a cockpit in which, by simple logic, he belongs. Not only that, but his hollered imperative — "Open the damn door!" — can be parsed by smartphone-level smarts.

Another man, alone in the cockpit, the co-pilot, has started a descent from 38,000 feet. There is no turbulence to avoid, no radiated instruction calling for deviation, no aircraft ahead to be dodged. AI is capable of gathering and processing all these clues that something is amiss.

Now the Airbus is at 30,000 feet. Still no turbulence, still no instructions. AI would realize that the situation is strikingly anomalous and issue a notification that, barring voice-provided rationale from the co-pilot, the plane will be automatically returned to its correct path.

The jet is now down to 15,000 feet. The passengers are screaming en masse. A guiding AI would surely get the message.

It would be able to calculate the outcome — hitting the rocky peaks that loom ahead, killing 150 humans. It would comprehend that there is no possible utilitarian benefit here, such as can obtain sometimes in war when, for instance, the