

Materialism Is Choking the Life Out of Us All



By Steven Yates

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According to published accounts, on May 1, a homeless and mentally ill black man named Jordan Neely, 30, was being more than simply annoying to other passengers on a Manhattan subway – something not uncommon, if my sources on what frequently happens on Manhattan subways are to be believed (I’ve never traveled one myself). He was menacing them and throwing trash at them.

Finally, an ex-marine named Daniel Penny, 24, stepped in, placed Neely in a chokehold and kept it on him for several minutes while waiting for authorities to arrive. No one tried to stop Penny. A couple of onlookers even assisted him. There is no reason to think Penny intended to end Neely’s life, but that’s what happened.

[According to Wikipedia:](#)

Witnesses said Neely was acting in a “hostile and erratic” manner, telling riders that he would hurt anyone on the train. [Freelance journalist Juan Alberto] Vázquez [who was filming the incident] said that Neely was shouting that he was hungry and thirsty, that he did not mind “going to jail or getting life in prison,” and was “ready to die.” Vázquez said that Neely did not physically attack anyone, while police sources said that other witnesses reported him throwing trash at

passengers. Penny approached Neely from behind and put him in a chokehold. The chokehold lasted for several minutes and at least three minutes were recorded on video. According to Vázquez, the chokehold lasted for 15 minutes. An onlooker warned Penny, saying, "You're gonna kill him now." After the chokehold, the onlooker said, "He's all right. He ain't gonna die." Vázquez said that Neely was moving and defending himself during the chokehold, and Vázquez did not believe that he would die. Neely was taken to Lenox Hill Hospital, where he was pronounced dead; according to some sources, he died on the subway car's floor.

Neely's death at the hands of a white male on a New York subway quickly became the latest flashpoint in the ongoing culture wars, especially when Penny was questioned by police at the scene and then immediately released. Protests erupted and continued over the next several days, some turning violent. The "Rev" Al Sharpton got involved. Penny finally turned himself in.

Neely's background was not enviable. His mother was murdered by an abusive boyfriend when he was 14. According to a relative, after testifying at the boyfriend's trial he developed PTSD and other psychological problems. He ended up in foster care, and then, as an adult, experienced periods of homelessness. He apparently picked up a few shillings impersonating Michael Jackson as a dancer but found no structured way to use whatever talents he had as a performer. He was on an official list of those most in need of shelter and treatment.

Clearly Neely had aggressive tendencies. He had been arrested 42 times by NYPD, three times for unprovoked assaults on women in the subway. Once he dragged a 7-year-old girl down a street. Recently he punched an elderly woman in the face, breaking her nose and an orbital bone. At the time of his death, he was supposed to have been living in a treatment facility, part of an alternative-to-incarceration program. He

appears to have left the facility after just a few days. He'd missed a court appearance, leading to a warrant for his arrest.

The long and short of it: we're looking at a severely damaged person here.

What of Daniel Penny? He's an ex-marine sergeant from Long Island. He had no previous criminal record. Now he stands charged with second-degree manslaughter. If convicted, he could face up to 15 years in prison. During the incident he appears to have had the support of those around him. A couple even assisted him in restraining Neely. One onlooker – a black woman, incidentally – has promised to testify on his behalf if necessary.

Most corporate media and political class responses were as predictable as winter following fall. (Some, I should note, predate Penny's being in custody.)

From Metropolitan Transportation Authority chair Janno Lieber: Neely's death was "really troubling and upsetting ... [riders should] find a way to deescalate" if "challenges" emerge on a subway.

From New York State Senator Julia Salazar: "A man named Jordan Neely was choked to death in public on the subway this week while people watched and even cheered. This is horrific. The constant demonization of poor people and people in mental health crisis in our city allows for this barbarism. It is making our city sick." She went on to call Neely's death a "lynching."

From Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: "Jordan Neely was murdered. But [because] Jordan was houseless and crying for food in a time when the city is raising rents and stripping services to militarize itself while many in power demonize the poor, the murderer gets protected [with] passive headlines [and] no charges. It's disgusting."

From New York City Comptroller Brad Lander: “We must not become a city where a mentally ill human being can be choked to death by a vigilante without consequence.”

From Mayor Eric Adams: Neely’s death was “tragic”; he also stated that “there’s a lot we don’t know about what happened here.” Asked about vigilantism, he said that “we cannot blanketly tell passengers what they should or should not do.” During a press conference he called for the passage of the proposed Supportive Interventions Act which would lower the legal threshold for a person’s being involuntarily committed in New York.

From City Council member Tiffany Cabán: the killing was “the inevitable outcome of the dangerous rhetoric of stigmatizing mental health issues, stigmatizing poverty and the continued bloated investment in the carceral system at the expense of funding access to housing, food and health.”

New York Governor Kathy Hochul called Neely’s death “deeply disturbing.”

Daniel Penny and his supporters have been able to raise roughly \$2 million for his legal defense, from more than 45,000 online contributors.

Both Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Matt Gaetz (R-Fl.) have called him a hero.

But, yes, thinking of one comment, there’s more going on here than meets the eye. Different moral impulses are at work. Most people will claim that if they are subject to an unprovoked attack in public, they have a right to defend themselves, and with deadly force if necessary to save their own lives. And if they don’t have the means, they will leap to the defense of someone who does. All some have to do is imagine themselves in the same situation, confronted by someone who could pose a deadly threat and ask themselves what they would do. I think this is the source of Penny’s support.

Across the aisle are the instincts of those who contend, sincerely, that killing someone is always tragic, and wrong except in absolute cases of self-defense in a life-threatening situation, and that Penny should have let up on his chokehold when it was clear that Neely had been overpowered and was under control.

But at what point could he have been sure of this? (Video of final 3:45 [here](#).)

These two perspectives share a common premise: *human life matters*. It should not be snuffed out without a very good reason.

But do our systems and many of our most popular ideologies reflect this?

The answer is *No*, and there are reasons for that.

First, though, a disclaimer. Regarding the players in this unfortunate drama, I've relied on what corporate and some alternative media have released: no more and no less. I've corresponded with no one.

Be that as it may, it seems reasonable to ask what this man was doing on the street, or in a shelter, for that matter, as he seems to have had family. Perhaps his family was dysfunctional. The loss of the black family unit over the past several decades has been a tragedy in itself.

My role, over these decades, has been to study the dynamics of materialistic societies and outline the outcomes they yield which don't serve anyone.

Just as Penny choked Neely to death, however unintentionally, materialism is choking the life out all of us, out of our society.

Again unintentionally. Obviously the intellectuals who have defended materialism all these years don't want this kind of

result. But their attempts at a secular basis for a moral view of the universe and society have failed, in some cases miserably.

What do I mean by materialism in this context? I'm referring not to an obsession with material goods necessarily but to a philosophical view of our place in the world. I've written elsewhere at length on this subject. See [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#). (For additional objections to materialism as a theory of how nature works, [watch this](#).)

According to this philosophical view, we're just big-brained animals whose lives have no transcendent significance. There is nothing, no meaning to be assigned, to the idea of a world outside of space and time as we perceive it, and nothing beyond our lives in this world: no God or afterlife, in other words. When you're dead, you're dead. You're worm food. So we work at tasks having no significance beyond whatever ephemeral significance we can give them. The world as it presents itself to us has no intrinsic meaning or moral significance. In philosophy, this is called nihilism.

We are now at the end of a long process, which could be called the "real" replacement. Intellectuals, beginning during the Enlightenment, dropped God from their world picture. They replaced Him with either the Almighty State, The Science, or Money.

The first of these became, in the twentieth century, the biggest death merchant in history (Communism, Nazism, etc.; leading inevitably to the U.S. war machine). Enough said. But the State still has plenty of idolators.

The second? Science and technology may have transformed large portions of the world and our lives for the better with ever greater creature comforts, but think also of the Tuskegee Experiment. It was a triumph of the prevailing secular ethos, which is that some may be sacrificed for the supposed good of

others.

And given what evidence we have of what some of the apostles of The Science feel free to do, such as enhance the ability of coronaviruses to infect humans, the jury may not be out much longer that this surrogate for God, too, has feet of clay.

Materialist civilization has atomized us. For most Americans, public schools begin the process, throwing us into competitive situations and conveying not critical thinking skills or even that much practical knowledge, but obedience to authority and to dogmas, including about being free. Thus its graduates will unknowingly help government impose more authority and enable corporations to get richer.

The latter have organized their priorities around profitability, not human needs (look at Big Pharma and Big Tech). Beginning at least 30 years ago, stable communities found themselves undermined by de-industrialization as jobs went first to Mexico and then to China for ever cheaper labor. Corporations got wealthier; the middle class started its way toward the cliff as wages failed to keep up with the cost of living. Increasing automation meant technological unemployment at home.

More and more things became about money. Employed and want more? Develop a "side hustle." Have a retirement plan? (Saving only makes sense if currency maintains its value. Thanks to government / Federal Reserve printing presses, it has not.)

Now, with AI advancing by leaps and bounds, we could be looking at the biggest wave of technological unemployment in human history as corporations continue to enrich themselves. This is the legitimate fear surrounding AI, not that it will become self-aware, turn into Skynet, and take over the world. (The idea that properly programmed machines will develop consciousness and become agents able to think is part of the logic and ethos of materialism as a worldview.)

Regarding money and its distribution, big cities provide macrocosms of a world with a small minority of have-a-lots, the ruling class, with a few haves who serve them and have a similar mindset; and a lot of have-nots who ran honest businesses and increasingly came up empty-handed believing they were playing by the rules. Financialization, as I've noted in countless places, functions as a kind of welfare-statism in reverse. It redistributes wealth upwards and into the hands of those for whom money and power are their only core values.

The indifference of the have-a-lots is thus palpable. These are the global superelites, be they individuals or corporate entities: think of George Soros, or the World Economic Forum, or a corporation such as Blackrock. When I speak of indifference, I speak of indifference from the standpoint of a moral posture that regards human lives as having intrinsic value, not extrinsic value derived from what's in their pocket or bank account or investments, the number of followers they have on Twitter, or endorsements from "influencers."

In this ethos, the powerful and influential pursue agendas. Some of what they do, they don't bother to hide. Klaus Schwab, for example, writes and publishes a book entitled COVID-19: The Great Reset (2020). Corporate media then gaslights us by calling the Great Reset a "baseless conspiracy theory."

Whether these people are conscious materialists, I have no idea. What they are doing is living out the most important consequence of the materialist view of the universe: that ultimately there are no moral restrictions on rulership, so that those who believe themselves most fit to rule and have the means to rule are free to do so. They can reinvent themselves as Platonist "philosopher-kings" (see Plato's *The Republic*), redesigning as much of the world as possible into the Platonist image of what they believe to be Utopia.

Their Utopia, of course, will be Dystopia for the have-nots and, for that matter, any haves who somehow cross up the elites at some point.

We go through a period of anarcho-tyranny in the meantime. Anarcho-tyranny is a societal state in which random criminal violence is allowed to create chaos. Policies like defunding the police further this, as well as rationalizing black criminality by blaming it on “systemic racism” and calling it a form of reparations. But as petty crimes such as shoplifting cease to be prosecuted, as in Alvin Bragg’s Manhattan, businesses, plagued by losses, and by the occasional flash mob, cannot function. They close.

And if anyone responds to criminality with deadly force when the authorities do not, he or she is demonized as a “vigilante” in corporate media or by legal eagles, then viciously prosecuted in the face of violent protests by a politicized legal system. Protests are easy to orchestrate on social media if race is a factor, as it was in Jordan Neely’s death.

Materialism, again, has the consequence that human life has no intrinsic value. Its only value is extrinsic: what can be monetized by an employer (or oneself), what the crowd says (and the marketplace is just a variant on crowd dynamics), or what is stipulated by loved ones – quite real but no less transitory.

All values are ephemeral. After all, again, we’re all just big-brained mammals who have been atomized, demoralized, and in some cases dehumanized. Some will act the part by shooting their fellow big-brained mammals at random – and then often ending their own lives if not shot to death by police.

I see the horror of Neely’s defenders as valid but superficial. Most of it reflects no awareness of the philosophical issues behind the atomizing of human beings and

their being discarded, like trash. This vague sense, that one's life is purposeless, may well turn out to be a major cause of mental illness. There are probably tens of thousands of Jordan Neelys running around in every major city. This is because black lives are mattering only if they can be used to score political points for the hard left.

Not that the right has a firm handle on what is going on. I don't hear Donald Trump, currently the de facto leader of the Republican Party, talking about materialism. I don't think he is capable of the level of abstract thought that would require. But neither is Ron DeSantis talking about it. Mike Pence? He may have a weak version of the idea, but he's compromised for other reasons.

The political class has no answer to this. Collectively, it doesn't understand the question.

Practically no "influencers" are talking about materialism. It is past time for that to change. This is one reason [I've written a book](#) about where philosophy should go. So far, its readership has been limited to my immediate circle of associates (if even that).

There are a few Daniel Pennys out there, though: action-takers rather than thinkers. But as they continue to be prosecuted for trying to protect the public, their numbers will dwindle – just as stable families and church attendance are dropping all across the West, for all ethnicities.

What to do? I'm doing it here, shouting from my own rooftop as it were, that this is about far more than a man unintentionally killing another man on a New York subway and inflammatory responses from corporate media and political class "influencers."

This article first appeared on the author's [Substack](#). Subscribe [here](#).

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Steven Yates's latest book ***What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory*** (2021) is available [here](#) and [here](#). His earlier ***Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic*** (2011) is available [here](#).

While admittedly the real world can be scary enough, he has also written a novel of cosmic horror. ***The Shadow Over Sarnath*** will be published on October 31, 2023. To learn more, shoot me an email.