

HOMO PROFANUS

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And if the body were not the soul,

what is the soul?

Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric"

Welcome, sisters and brothers and beloved others, to the National Paranormal Society's 220th annual convocation! I'm honored to be named your keynote speaker – though I do wonder who must have declined the honor first in order to make that possible. Ha ha! In any case, I'm pleased to announce a sizable increase in Society membership this year, which climbs despite, or perhaps *because*, confirmed ghost sightings have continued their precipitous, decades-long decline.

You're undoubtedly aware of the crisis gripping our field. History is littered with accounts of ghosts – many of which were, in their day, deemed factual. Setting aside obviously fictional literary examples, we have centuries of newspaper stories reporting apparitions and hauntings, memoirs recounting revenant spirits, tourism guides and local legends denoting haunted sites, and plenty of other allegedly nonfiction texts that document paranormal occurrences. You know, too, that through the Society's methods, we have confirmed a great number of these texts to be accurate and factual.

Yet the number of these accounts dwindles with each passing year. Public skepticism does not seem to be the culprit; the ludicrous and inconsistent beliefs held by the growing anti-vaccine and flat earth cadres, for instance, suggest that people remain prepared to entertain ideas infinitely more far-fetched than the prospect of earthbound souls. Rather, the cause appears to be that the ghost population – if you'll forgive the biology-inflected term – is on the wane.

The quantity and frequency of ghostly events *should* have risen proportionally with the human population, as time has swelled the ranks of the dead and supplied no shortage of people to encounter their lingering spirits. But instead, we've witnessed the opposite: the natural degradation and dissolution of extant ghosts has continued unimpeded, but deaths from our era have not begotten new ghosts to compensate. Now the worldwide ghost population has dramatically thinned. Even our host city of Boston, once replete with hauntings that date as far back as the colonial era, today retains only a single confirmed specimen: the so-called "Fenway Rusalka," who stalks the waterlogged ruins of Back Bay.

The trend is clear. Ghosts are disappearing, without being replaced. In time, we might say that ghosts – again, pardon the expression – are doomed to extinction.

What, then, has triggered this decline? As an evolutionary biologist, I've devised a possible explanation. And I am afraid that my answer carries implications far more frightening than any ghost.

Let's begin with some data. If I may direct your attention to the screen behind me... This slide depicts the estimated ghost population in a given decade, as inferred from contemporary accounts. Observe the conspicuous downward trajectory, culminating in *zero* new ghost sightings over the past several years.

Now let me overlay some key historical moments. Note how the ghost population's decline surprisingly *doesn't* coincide with the scientific method's emergence (which we might call the advent of skepticism). In fact, it holds steady for several decades thereafter. The first pronounced drop doesn't occur until the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade. We behold similar collapses following the Indigenous genocides in North America, World Wars I through III, and the Great Arctic Melt – though you'd imagine such heinous, high-fatality events would have *raised* the ghost population.

The takeaway?

The data indicates an undeniable correlation between the decreasing ghost population and the worsening inhumanity of mankind.

To wit: we've developed lethal technologies that kill with ever-increasing efficiency; we've allowed poverty and inequality to fester; we've idled as catastrophic climate change wipes out the most vulnerable. And all the while, like an indicator species for our moral degradation, we find fewer and fewer ghosts among us.

Which brings me to my core hypothesis.

There are fewer souls clinging to this earthly plane because *there are fewer souls, period*. The ghost decline is symptomatic of an uncomfortable step in human evolution. Namely: humans possessed souls at one point, but have evolved not to have them any longer.

How has this happened? And why?

Think of the soul like an organ – not in terms of function, but of vulnerability. In the same way that excessive alcohol consumption poisons the liver, the soul sustains damage from moral trespass. Unethical behavior harms it; evil is anathema to it. In consequence, possessing a soul poses evolutionary disadvantages. It prohibits actions it dubs morally impermissible, thereby limiting the courses organisms may pursue in furtherance of their own survival – and reducing the odds that such organisms endure.

As a matter of raw statistics, we could say immorality is more conducive to biological survival. And in an increasingly immoral world, the best-adapted organisms have jettisoned the organs least able to tolerate it. Ergo, our environment has not selected for souls.

If my suppositions are correct, they carry alarming consequences.

First, given that we now lack a fundamental component of the humans who preceded us, we face the possibility that we are a different species than our recent ancestors. *Homo sapiens* may no longer be our correct name. Perhaps *Homo secularis* is more accurate – if not *Homo profanus*.

The absence of new ghosts also suggests that *Homo sapiens* is itself extinct. And if the soul is indeed a biologically hardwired moral compass, then the only species known to have it has perished from this earth. Put differently: the sweet, the kind, the caring (those capable of salvation, if you subscribe to such doctrines) died off long ago. Only we remain – the dregs tailored for an amoral world.

Furthermore, my hypothesis uncovers a troubling facet of evolution itself. The presence of ghosts has offered slight but hopeful evidence of an existence that continues after biological death. Yet, if ghosts are disappearing for the reasons I've articulated, it follows that evolution does not – and perhaps *cannot* – select for non-biological survival. Evolution may even be at odds with it, driving entities of the spirit into obsolescence so that the material and transient may reign.

And if ghosts truly constitute proof that there exists a hereafter, then we must confront the most startling realization of all:

None of us will ever see it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander B. Joy holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He typically writes about literature, film, philosophy, and game studies.