

Resurrection and Rival Explanations — 49

Prior Probability, Testimonial Underdetermination, and the Limits of Abductive Confidence

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: [0009-0009-3725-8682](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3725-8682)

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Central claim

A literal, divinely caused resurrection is not publicly warranted merely because it fits early Christian evidence or outperforms a few isolated rivals. The comparison must cover all non-resurrection histories—including combined and still-unclassified cases—and must state priors and control dependent reports. The record strongly supports early resurrection belief but does not show a likelihood advantage large enough to overcome the specified event’s prior disadvantage. That is an evidential limit, not disproof; independent evidence for a particular God-concept could change the prior.

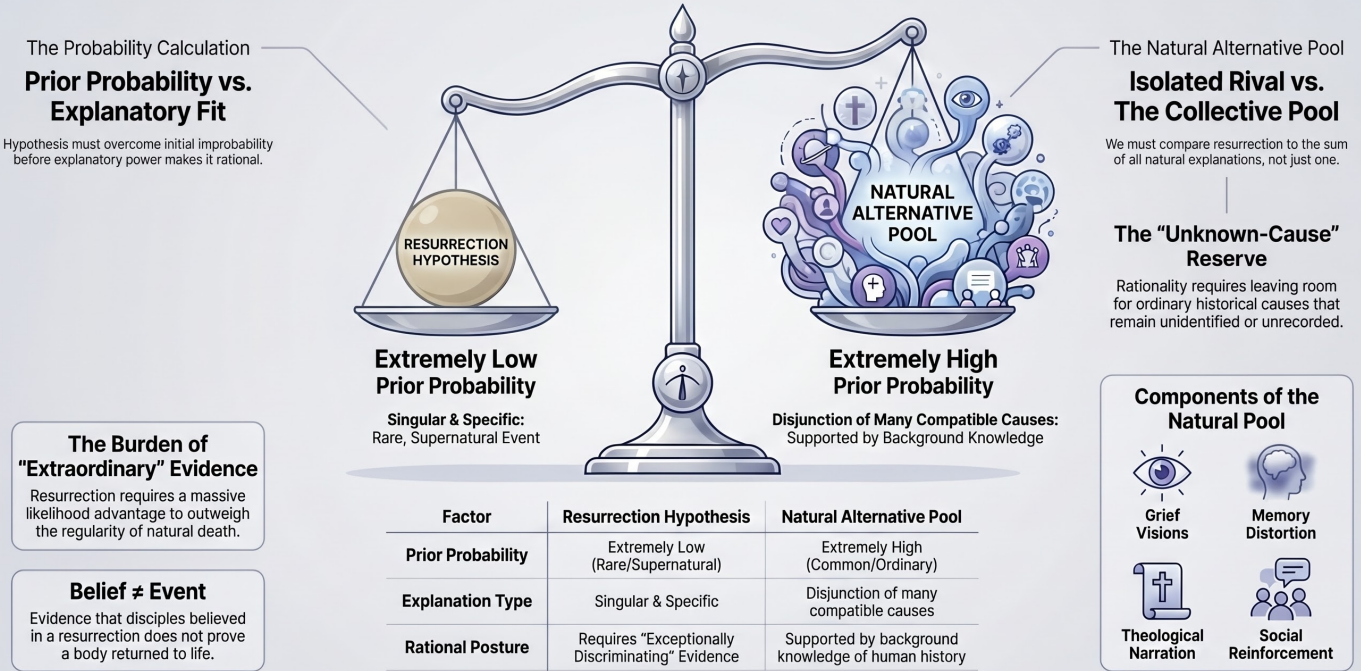
Preview:

Target claim	Required bridge	Evidence pressure	Bounded result
The historical record itself makes a specified divine resurrection more probable than every non-resurrection history.	Compare it with all non-resurrection histories, state the prior, and model dependence among reports.	The sources support sincere early belief more directly than they discriminate event histories.	Treat the record as strong evidence for early belief, not decisive evidence for the event; a theological conditional remains open.

The analysis tests an inference from testimony to event. It does not assume that miracles are impossible, that every natural history is equally plausible, or that theology is reducible to public historical method.

Visual preview:

The Resurrection Odds: Weighing Evidence Against the “Natural Pool”



The visual contrasts the specified resurrection hypothesis with a pooled ordinary alternative and separates belief from event. The paper’s comparator is broader: every non-resurrection history, including rival supernatural and residual cases. The qualitative scale assigns no numerical priors and does not permit overlapping causes to be counted twice; the paper supplies a partitioned comparison and dependence controls. It depicts an evidential burden, not an impossibility.

Abstract

The early Christian record strongly supports early resurrection belief, but it does not establish that a literal, divinely caused resurrection is more probable than the complete non-resurrection comparator. Explanatory fit alone is insufficient because posterior judgment also depends on prior odds; a short list of simple rivals does not exhaust the complement; and reports that share sources or traditions cannot be multiplied as independent confirmations. This paper therefore separates belief, event, and theological package; reconstructs the Bayesian burden; partitions the non-resurrection space into mutually exclusive composite and residual histories; and uses an evidence ledger to assess both the record and major affirmative strategies. The sources establish early and sometimes costly belief more directly than they discriminate the event that produced it. Their dependence and limited event discrimination leave the required likelihood advantage unshown. The conclusion is bounded: it neither proves resurrection impossible nor denies that independent evidence for a particular God-concept could raise the prior. A public case should state that background, map source dependence, and compare the specified event with the entire weighted alternative space.

Keywords: resurrection; miracles; testimony; historical method; Bayesian reasoning; abduction; prior probability; explanatory comparison

1. The Claim and Its Burden

The early Christian record is strong evidence that resurrection belief arose early. It is not, by itself, decisive evidence that Jesus was bodily raised. The public inference under pressure moves from reports and belief to a specified divine event; that move succeeds only if the evidence discriminates that event from every non-resurrection history strongly enough to overcome the prior odds. A report of an event, a belief that the event occurred, and the event are not the same thing.

Three propositions therefore need to remain separate. Let the *resurrection hypothesis* be the claim that Jesus was bodily raised from death through the intentional action of the particular deity described by a specified God-concept. Let *resurrection belief* refer to the early convictions, proclamations, and reports that Jesus had been raised or appeared after death. Let the *theological package* include further claims about the identity of the agent, Jesus's status, atonement, revelation, scriptural authority, and future human destiny. Evidence can strongly support the second proposition without establishing the first, and even the first would not entail the whole third proposition without additional premises.

That distinction does not dismiss testimony. Testimony is indispensable to historical knowledge. It instead asks what testimony most directly establishes. A sincere appearance report is evidence that a person had or accepted an experience interpreted as an appearance. Whether the best explanation is a bodily encounter depends on the source's proximity, transmission, dependence on other sources, susceptibility to interpretation, and comparative alternatives. The move from belief to event is an inference, not a transparent window.

The governing thesis can be expressed as four tests. A public historical argument must (1) compare the specified resurrection hypothesis with the complete non-resurrection space, (2) disclose the background commitments that set the prior odds, (3) model shared sources and traditions rather than treating dependent reports as independent, and (4) show that the surviving evidence discriminates the event strongly enough to cross the posterior threshold. The available record does not establish that four-part burden. This is an evidential boundary, not a declaration of impossibility.

The specification matters. A *God-concept* is a particular conception of a deity, including the attributes, intentions, powers, and modes of action assigned to it. General theism does not automatically predict that this agent would raise this person at this time and leave this particular documentary record. The prior for the resurrection hypothesis therefore depends not only on whether some deity exists, but also on the probability of the relevant attributes and intention. Independent evidence for that precise conception could change the prior. The historical reports cannot simply be used to create the conception and then be counted again as independent support for the event it predicts.

The burden in one sentence

The public case succeeds only if the total evidence is more expected under the specified resurrection hypothesis than under a complete, dependence-aware non-resurrection comparator by enough to overcome the prior odds against that hypothesis.

2. Explanation Is Not Yet Probability

Inference to the best explanation is a familiar historical practice. Historians compare scope, explanatory power, plausibility, simplicity, fit with background knowledge, and resistance to ad hoc repair. McCullagh's influential account formalizes such comparative virtues while also making clear that explanatory ranking is a structured judgment, not an automatic conversion from a good story to truth (McCullagh, 1984). The difficulty is especially sharp when the proposed explanation describes an event with a very different prior probability from its rivals.

Bayes's theorem makes the missing relation visible. In odds form,

$$\frac{P(R | E)}{P(N | E)} = \frac{P(E | R)}{P(E | N)} \times \frac{P(R)}{P(N)}.$$

Here, R is the specified resurrection hypothesis, N is the complete non-resurrection comparator, and E is the total historical evidence. The first fraction on the right is the likelihood ratio: how much better the evidence is predicted by one side than the other. The second is the prior odds: their relative credibility before the evidence under review is added. A favorable likelihood ratio may raise the probability of R while leaving N more probable overall. Explanatory improvement and posterior victory are different achievements.

This framework does not require pretending that historians possess exact decimal values. Comparative judgments can remain qualitative or use ranges. But the framework does require consistency. One cannot call a resurrection antecedently extraordinary when emphasizing the miracle and then treat its prior as irrelevant when weighing testimony. Nor can one assign natural histories low probability one at a time and infer that their union is low without considering how many such histories exist and how their probabilities combine. Standard Bayesian accounts emphasize that likelihood and prior information answer different questions and must both enter the conclusion (Howson & Urbach, 2006).

Hume's discussion of miracles is often read as an absolute ban on believing testimony for extraordinary events (Hume, 1748/2000). That reading is too simple. Earman shows that some of Hume's formulations are probabilistically defective and that strong enough testimony could in principle overcome a low prior (Earman, 2000). The correction helps both sides. Testimony is not powerless, but neither is the low prior erased. The relevant question is how strong the likelihood ratio actually is after the comparison and the dependence of evidence are properly modeled.

A defender might reply that theism raises the prior. It can, but only conditionally. Evidence for a particular God-concept, its purposes, and its relation to Jesus could make the event less surprising. The resulting argument would then be: given this independently supported theological background, resurrection has a higher prior and the historical evidence completes the case. That route can itself be argued in public. But the historical record is no longer doing all the work, and the same reports cannot supply the theological background and then be counted again as independent support for the event it predicts. The disagreement becomes more precise: which background commitments are independently warranted, and how much predictive work do they perform?

3. The Full Comparator

The phrase *natural alternative* can mislead in two ways. First, N is the logical complement of the specified resurrection hypothesis: it contains every history in which that event did not occur, including ordinary histories

and rival supernatural histories. Ordinary mechanisms receive sustained attention because they are familiar and often assessed too narrowly, not because naturalism is assumed. Second, the phrase can suggest a contest in which resurrection faces one complete rival at a time: fraud alone, grief hallucination alone, legend alone, or mistaken identity alone. Historical developments can have several causes. A visionary experience may be sincere; its interpretation may be shaped by expectation; a report may change in transmission; community reinforcement may stabilize it; and later narratives may add detail. Showing that no single mechanism explains everything does not defeat a composite history.

Yet one should not solve this problem by adding overlapping alternatives as if each were a separate ticket in a lottery. Hallucination, bereavement, memory reconstruction, social reinforcement, and narrative development can occur together. Naively summing their probabilities would count some histories more than once. The proper comparator is a partition: a set of mutually exclusive cells whose union covers N at the chosen level of description. Each cell describes a whole causal history or a non-overlapping class of histories. The probability of the evidence under N is then a weighted mixture of the evidence probabilities under those cells.

This yields three practical requirements.

1. **Include composite histories.** A cell may involve sincere experiences, interpretive expectation, transmission, and institutional reinforcement together. Complexity is not automatically ad hoc; the question is whether the components are independently familiar, connected by ordinary causal pathways, and supported by the record.
2. **Keep the cells mutually exclusive.** If two descriptions overlap, refine them until a history falls into only one cell. This prevents double counting and makes the weights intelligible.
3. **Reserve a residual cell.** Historical evidence is incomplete. A residual category for other non-resurrection histories prevents a false claim that an investigator's present imagination exhausts the space. The residual is not positive evidence for any convenient story; it is an acknowledgment that defeating a named list does not make the complement empty.

Johnson similarly argues that abductive treatment of resurrection can conceal the relevant hypothesis space and prior comparison (Johnson, 2021). The point is not that every conceivable alternative deserves equal weight. Implausible cells may receive little weight. The point is that the resurrection hypothesis must defeat the weighted comparator as a whole, not merely outscore its weakest members.

Comparator feature	Required treatment	Mistake avoided	Epistemic effect
Composite causation	Represent complete histories with several compatible processes	Demanding that one mechanism explain every datum	Ordinary processes can cooperate without any one being sufficient
Mutual exclusivity	Refine cells so that each history appears once	Adding overlapping alternatives as independent probabilities	The mixture likelihood remains coherent
Unequal weights	Assign greater weight to better-supported history classes	Treating mere conceivability as equiprobability	Familiar and evidentially grounded histories matter more
Residual cell	Retain an explicit class for other non-resurrection histories	Mistaking a short list for an exhaustive space	Ignorance limits confidence without becoming a favored explanation

Table 1: How to construct a complete non-resurrection comparator without either ignoring alternatives or counting them twice.

4. What the Evidence Establishes

The record clears one important threshold: early resurrection belief is central to explaining Christian origins. It does not thereby clear the different threshold of identifying the event that produced that belief. Major historical treatments differ sharply over details. Wright emphasizes the novelty and Jewish context of the claim; Licona defends a historiographical case based on a set of facts he regards as well established; Allison combines historical judgment with sustained attention to apologetic and skeptical overreach (Allison, 2021; Licona, 2010; Wright, 2003). Their differences matter, but none licenses moving from “early and sincere belief” to “therefore bodily resurrection” without the four-part comparison.

Table 2 is an evidence ledger rather than a verdict table. It asks what each broad body of evidence supports most directly, which dependency or alternative limits its discriminatory power, and what bounded conclusion follows.

Evidence	What it supports	Dependence or alternative	Limited conclusion
Early proclamation and creedal material	Resurrection belief arose early rather than only after centuries	Formula, interpretation, and later record are not independent observations of the event	Early belief is well supported; event type remains underdetermined
Appearance traditions	Some individuals or groups were understood to have encountered Jesus after death	Reports may share sources; experience, memory, and interpretation are separable	Experiences or accepted reports need explanation; embodiment is not yet fixed
Tomb tradition	Some narrative strands locate the claim in an empty-tomb setting	Historicity, narrative development, and the connection between absence and cause remain disputed	Even an empty tomb would eliminate neither relocation nor other non-resurrection histories
Movement and willingness to suffer	At least some participants held costly convictions	Sincerity discriminates against conscious fabrication more than against sincere error	Commitment supports belief intensity, not the truth of every interpretation

Table 2: The evidence is historically significant, but its strongest direct conclusion is early resurrection belief. Independence and event discrimination must be argued, not assumed.

Dependence is crucial. Four texts are not four independent witnesses if later writers draw from earlier texts, shared oral traditions, common liturgical formulas, or the same community memory. Nor do four details within one narrative become four independent likelihood multipliers. Correlated evidence can still be strong, but its force is less than a product obtained by multiplying each item as though learning one made the others no more expected.

Group reports introduce a related ambiguity. A collective report might reflect several individual experiences, a shared event, the acceptance of a spokesperson’s experience, a jointly stabilized memory, or a later summary. The wording alone does not decide among these pathways. The case improves when a source is early, specific, traceable to an identifiable person, independent of other sources, and difficult to expect under the comparator. Those are evidential virtues; asserting them is not enough.

Sincerity is important but limited. If a person accepts danger for a claim, deliberate fraud becomes less likely. Sincere mistake, visionary experience, interpretive error, memory change, and communal reinforcement do not thereby become less likely to the same degree. The inference “they would not suffer for what they knew was false” answers one alternative: knowingly maintained fabrication. The full comparator contains histories in which no central participant knowingly lies.

5. The Strongest Affirmative Cases

A fair comparison should address the best versions of the affirmative argument. Four strategies are especially important.

First, Wright situates resurrection belief within Second Temple Jewish expectations and argues that neither a generic afterlife nor ordinary messianic disappointment readily explains the specific Christian claim (Wright, 2003). The strength of this approach is its historical texture: it asks why this belief took this form. Its limit is that novelty and specificity do not by themselves identify the event that produced them. Cultural resources constrain interpretation without mechanically determining it, and creative reinterpretation is one thing historical movements sometimes do under pressure.

Second, Licona uses historical criteria and explanatory comparison to argue that resurrection best accounts for a selected set of facts (Licona, 2010). The strength is methodological explicitness. The remaining question is whether the selected facts are independent enough, whether their uncertainty is propagated into the conclusion, and whether the comparison includes a complete mixture of non-resurrection histories rather than a handful of simple rivals.

Third, the McGrews present a cumulative probabilistic case in which numerous testimonial details combine to produce a large likelihood ratio (McGrew & McGrew, 2009). This rightly recognizes that extraordinary claims are not immune to evidence. The decisive issue is evidential dependence. A case does not become cumulative by counting the same tradition several times. Each multiplier needs a defense that the item is substantially independent given the competing hypotheses and that its probability under the alternative comparator has not been understated.

Fourth, Swinburne embeds resurrection within a wider probabilistic theology that includes reasons for expecting a divine incarnation and identifying its occurrence (Swinburne, 2003). This is perhaps the clearest example of a coherent conditional strategy: a developed God-concept can raise the prior. Its public reach depends on the independent warrant for that larger framework. Readers who do not share those premises have not been given a purely historical route to the same prior.

These strategies are more serious than the claim that “nothing else explains the evidence.” They nevertheless face four common burdens:

1. **Source selection:** explain why the admitted facts are reliable and how contested facts affect the result.
2. **Dependence control:** identify shared sources and conditional relationships before multiplying evidential force.
3. **Prior transparency:** state which God-concept and background commitments make the event initially plausible.
4. **Comparator completeness:** compare the specified resurrection hypothesis with a weighted partition that includes composite and residual histories.

Together these burdens locate what a successful public case must show, and the cases considered do not yet show it. A good explanation may raise the resurrection hypothesis substantially. The unestablished step is whether the dependence-controlled evidence raises it above the entire comparator after prior odds are included.

6. Three Conclusions the Evidence Must Not Conflate

Disagreement is often intensified because participants defend different conclusions while using the same word *resurrection*. Table 3 separates three routes.

The historical-only route carries the largest comparative burden because it claims that the record itself survives disagreement about theological priors. The theologically conditional route can also be publicly argued,

Route	Claim	What it achieves	Evidential cost
Historical-only/public	The record alone makes the specified resurrection more probable than all non-resurrection histories	A conclusion intended to survive disagreement about theological background	Must earn the prior, dependence controls, and full comparison from shared evidence
Theologically conditional	Given an independently supported God-concept and its intentions, the record favors resurrection	A conclusion conditional on a separately argued theological background	Must defend that background separately and avoid counting the reports twice
Possibility	Resurrection cannot be ruled out in principle	Blocks an a priori impossibility claim	Does not establish probability, superiority, or the theological package

Table 3: Three legitimate but non-equivalent conclusions. Evidence adequate for one route may be inadequate for another.

but its resurrection conclusion depends on premises established outside the historical record and should be stated conditionally. The possibility route is the easiest to defend and the weakest in consequence.

Even a successful historical argument for bodily return would not by itself entail every theological conclusion sometimes attached to it. The identity and character of the agent, the purpose of the event, doctrines of atonement, scriptural inerrancy, ecclesial authority, and a general future resurrection require additional premises. An event does not arrive with a complete interpretation attached. The evidential chain is stronger when each link is stated rather than when the entire package is placed inside the word *resurrection*.

7. Objections and Replies

7.1 “Low priors merely smuggle in naturalism”

A low prior need not assume that naturalism is certainly true. It can reflect the specificity of the claim: a particular agent with particular intentions performs a unique act involving a particular person. A theist may assign that claim a higher prior than a naturalist, but general theism still underdetermines the agent’s intention. The constructive response is to state the God-concept and offer independent evidence for it. Hiding the background disagreement by declaring priors irrelevant does not remove it.

7.2 “Best explanation avoids disputed numbers”

Exact numbers are optional; the distinction between likelihood and posterior probability is not. If two explanations have similar priors, explanatory ranking may be enough for practical judgment. If their priors differ greatly, a claim of superior fit does not reveal whether the advantage crosses the posterior threshold. Qualitative ranges, sensitivity analysis, or explicit comparative premises can expose the issue without false precision.

7.3 “Composite alternatives are ad hoc”

Some are. An alternative becomes suspicious when components are invented solely to escape a datum, lack independent precedent, or require an implausible conjunction. But multiple causation is normal in history. Bereavement, expectation, memory, group dynamics, and narrative transmission are independently familiar and can interact. Resurrection also contains a conjunction: the relevant deity exists, has the attributed powers and

intentions, selects Jesus, acts at that time, and produces the observed record. Complexity must be assessed symmetrically rather than counted only on one side.

7.4 “The evidence converges”

Convergence is powerful when evidence streams are independently produced and each is more expected under the same hypothesis. The premise cannot be inferred from the number of texts or details alone. Literary dependence, shared tradition, and common community formation can produce correlated reports. The case should map these relationships and show how much force remains after conditioning on them.

7.5 “This method makes miracles impossible by definition”

It does not. A sufficiently strong likelihood ratio can overcome low prior odds, as the Bayesian correction to crude readings of Hume makes clear. Nor must the prior remain low if independent evidence supports the relevant God-concept. The method sets a threshold and asks whether the present evidence crosses it. The answer can be no without the answer being never.

8. What Would Cross the Threshold?

The conclusion is not a fixed refusal; the four-part threshold responds to evidence. The following developments would materially strengthen a historical-only public case:

- demonstrably independent, contemporaneous reports with identified authors, clear access to the alleged events, and content unlikely to arise from shared tradition;
- physical evidence with a documented chain of custody that strongly discriminates bodily return from removal, misidentification, later reconstruction, and ordinary biological histories;
- a dependence-aware model showing that the combined evidence remains far more expected under the resurrection hypothesis than under the partitioned comparator across reasonable assignments of weights;
- independent evidence for the relevant God-concept, including reasons to expect this agent to raise this person in a way that produces this documentary pattern;
- successful predictions of evidence not used to construct the hypothesis, stated before that evidence is discovered or evaluated.

These standards do not demand anachronistic video or perfect records. Ancient history often warrants conclusions with incomplete evidence. The required strength depends on the contrast. Ordinary claims can be established by ordinary documentary patterns because their priors and alternatives are comparatively familiar. A unique divine intervention needs evidence with correspondingly greater discriminatory force.

Evidence could also weaken the affirmative case: clearer demonstrations of literary dependence, later dating, unstable transmission, or alternative processes that predict the data well would raise the mixture likelihood under the non-resurrection comparator. Conversely, stronger source independence and unexpected detail under that comparator would lower it. The framework is therefore revisable in both directions.

9. Conclusion

The early Christian evidence makes resurrection belief historically important and in need of explanation. It does not follow that a literal, divinely caused resurrection is the best-supported event history. That stronger conclusion requires a comparison with the whole non-resurrection space, not a victory over fraud alone, hallucination alone,

legend alone, or any other isolated rival. It also requires evidential dependence to be controlled and the prior for a specified divine action to be made explicit.

The present record supports an early and, for at least some participants, sincere conviction that Jesus had been raised. Its sources and their relationships do not establish a likelihood advantage large enough to show that the specified resurrection hypothesis overtakes the complete comparator. The appropriate conclusion is calibrated restraint: the event has not been disproved, but the public historical burden has not been met.

The practical correction is straightforward. Stop treating the defeat of a few simple rivals as victory over a hypothesis space. Partition that space without overlap, include composite and residual histories, show which reports are independent, state the theological background that sets the prior, and demonstrate that the evidence crosses the resulting threshold. Independent evidence for a particular God-concept could change the comparison. Until then, strong evidence for resurrection belief should not be redescribed as decisive evidence for resurrection itself. Anyone claiming otherwise should answer three questions plainly: Which evidence is substantially more expected under the specified resurrection hypothesis than under the weighted comparator? How independent are the reports that supply that advantage? Is the advantage large enough to reverse the prior odds?

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Numbered argument

- P1. If the public historical case warrants preferring the specified resurrection hypothesis to the complete non-resurrection comparator, then the total evidence must supply a dependence-controlled likelihood advantage large enough to overcome the prior odds favoring that comparator.
- P2. The available record supports early resurrection belief more directly than it discriminates the event that produced that belief, and its reports cannot be treated as mutually independent without further argument.
- P3. On the available assessments of source independence, event discrimination, and comparator coverage, the historical case does not establish the required likelihood advantage against a mutually exclusive, weighted partition that includes composite, rival-supernatural, and residual non-resurrection histories.
- C. Therefore, the available historical case does not warrant preferring the specified resurrection hypothesis to the complete non-resurrection comparator.

P1 and P3 yield C deductively by modus tollens. P2 is the central evidential reason for P3, but the step from P2 to P3 is inductive rather than deductive: it depends on assessments of source independence, event discrimination, comparator coverage and weighting, and relative likelihoods. The conclusion is therefore bounded by those assessments. It denies present warrant for comparative preference; it does not entail that the resurrection hypothesis is false or that no future evidence could establish it.

A.2 Symbols

- P : probability function.
- R : specified resurrection hypothesis.
- N : full non-resurrection comparator.
- E : total historical evidence.
- H_i : i -th mutually exclusive cell in partition of N .
- w_i : conditional weight $P(H_i \mid N)$.
- k : number of cells.

A.3 Symbolic counterpart

When the cells are exhaustive and mutually exclusive, and their nonnegative weights sum to one, the likelihood of the evidence under the non-resurrection comparator is

$$P(E | N) = \sum_{i=1}^k w_i P(E | H_i).$$

Posterior odds are then

$$\frac{P(R | E)}{P(N | E)} = \frac{P(E | R)}{\sum_{i=1}^k w_i P(E | H_i)} \times \frac{P(R)}{P(N)}.$$

Assuming positive prior odds and a nonzero comparator likelihood, preferring the resurrection hypothesis requires the likelihood ratio to exceed the inverse prior odds:

$$\left[\frac{P(E | R)}{\sum_{i=1}^k w_i P(E | H_i)} > \frac{P(N)}{P(R)} \right] \Leftrightarrow P(R | E) > P(N | E).$$

This symbolic statement does not supply the contested values. It displays the burden. P3 says that the current case has not established the inequality after dependence and comparator structure are taken seriously; P2 states the principal historical reason for that assessment.

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