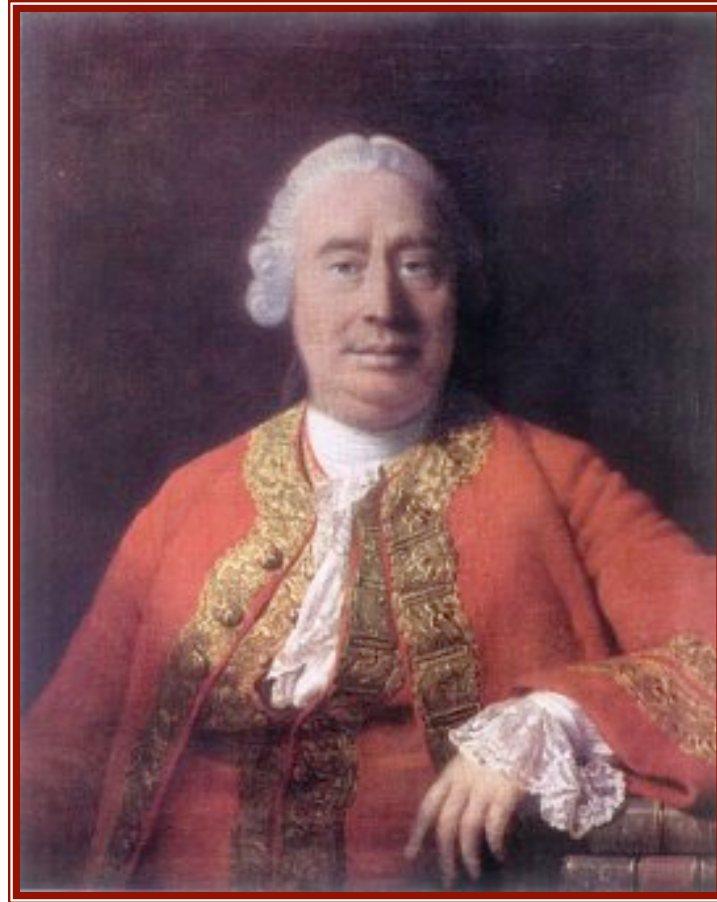


The theological significance of miracles

A way of validating the religious experiences of others.

A way of certifying a divine *revelation*.

David Hume (1711-1776)



Essay on Miracles (1748)

What is a miracle?

What does it take for an event to count as a *miracle*?

What is a miracle?

“A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” (footnote 22)

What this means:

A miracle would be a *particular exception* to the laws of nature brought about by some supernatural power.

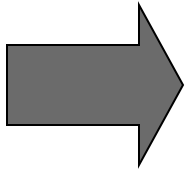
It may be helpful to think of God as the author of nature and all its laws. Things run in the same regular, divinely established way, unless God makes an exception.

If God made an exception to the law of gravity and a feather levitated (without any natural cause), that would be what Hume calls an “invisible miracle.”

“Invisible,” because you wouldn’t notice it...

Hume's claims

- The evidence for miracles typically consists entirely in human testimony.
- There is a *heavy burden of proof* for miracle claims.
- This burden has never been met by human testimony.



The “uniform experience” argument

There is a uniform experience *in favor* of any law of nature.

So there is a uniform experience *against* any supposed exception to that law.

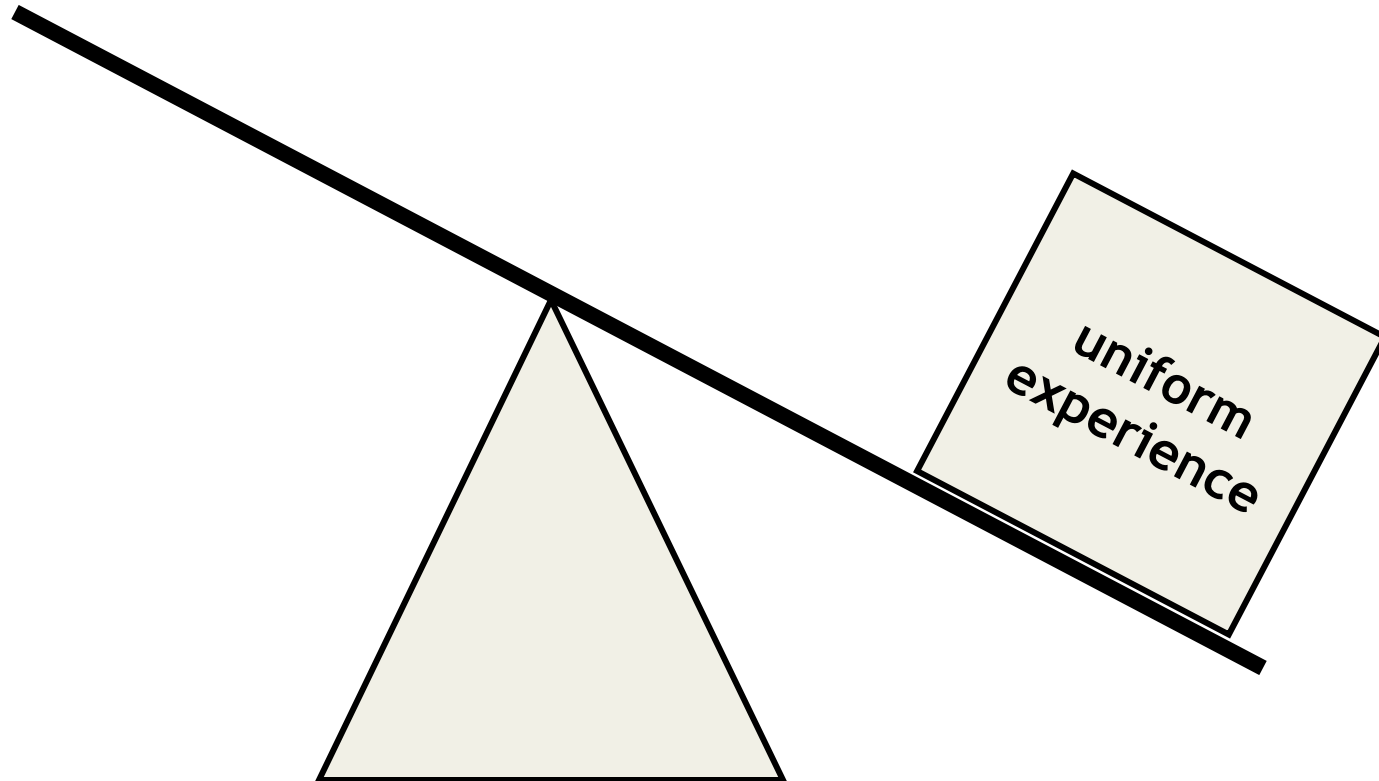
It follows that there is a heavy burden of proof for anyone who thinks a miracle has take place.

In other words, miracles have low *prior probability*.

Low prior probability establishes a heavy burden of proof

evidence for

evidence against



The “greater miracle” test

Don't believe a miracle story unless it would be an even “greater miracle” for the human beings who tell story to be lying or mistaken.

What this means: The evidence for the truth of the story must be greater than the HUGE amount of evidence we already have against it.

Is the “uniform experience argument” circular?

Sometimes Hume appears to be arguing that miracles have never happened because they never have.

“... it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; *because that has never been observed, in any age or country*. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.” (my italics)

Hume has set the bar so high

that it's unsurprising that he thinks the burden of proof has never been met by human testimony.

He's well aware, however, that miracle stories are featured prominently in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

He "pretends" to be a Christian and concludes that we simply take these miracles on faith.

Hume's ironic conclusion

“Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial **as it is, by no means, fitted to endure...**

“... we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day **cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one.** Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which **subverts all the principles of his understanding,** and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.”

The best way to refute Hume

Make a strong case for the truth of some miracle report.

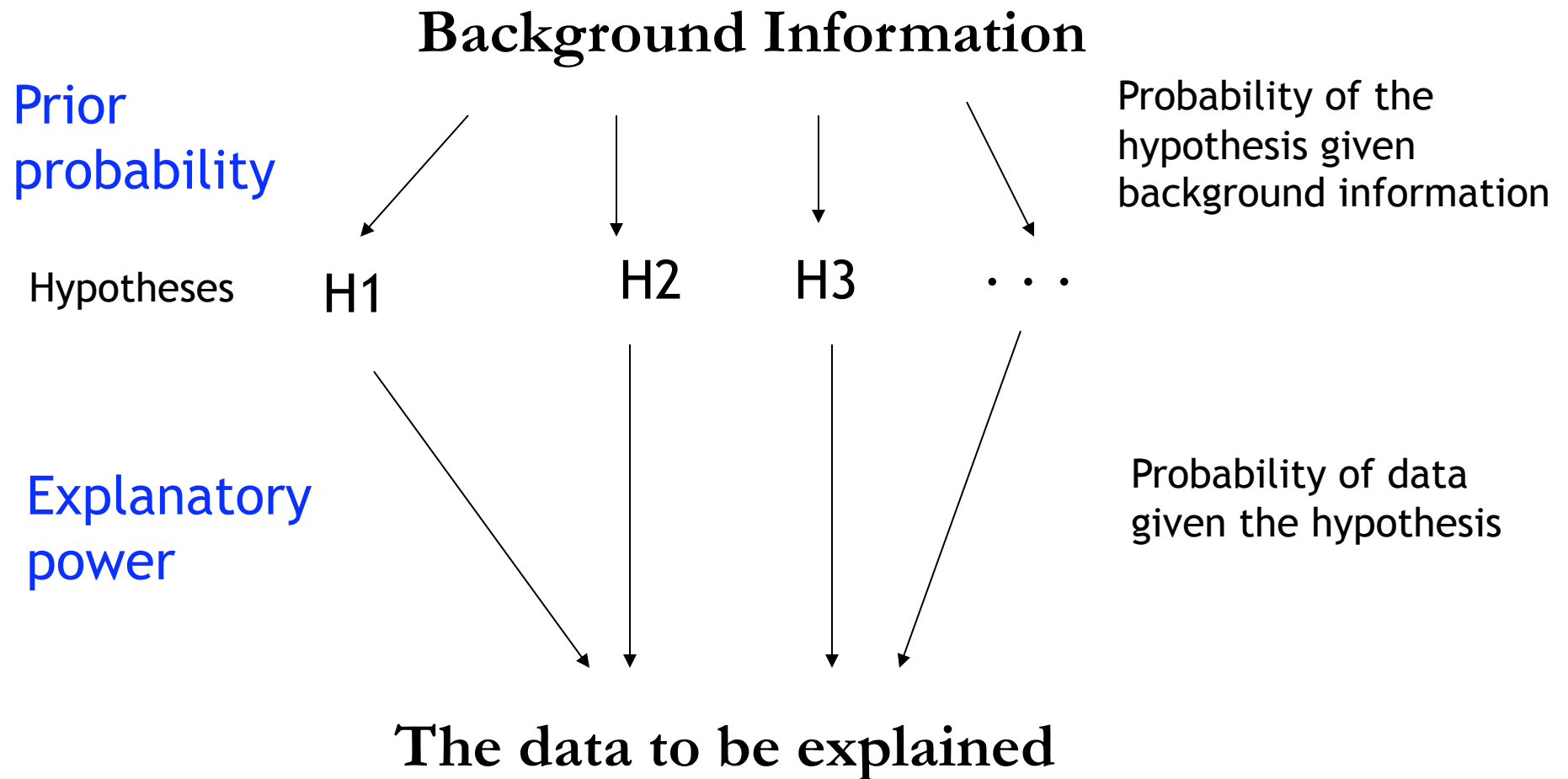
What about the resurrection of Jesus?



William Lane Craig (1949 -)

The logical structure of Craig's argument

An argument to the best explanation



Craig's *argument to the best explanation*

The data to be explained

- Resurrection appearances
- Empty tomb
- Transformation of the disciples

Non-miraculous hypotheses rejected

- Stolen body
- Swoon
- Hallucinations

Only the Resurrection Hypothesis left standing

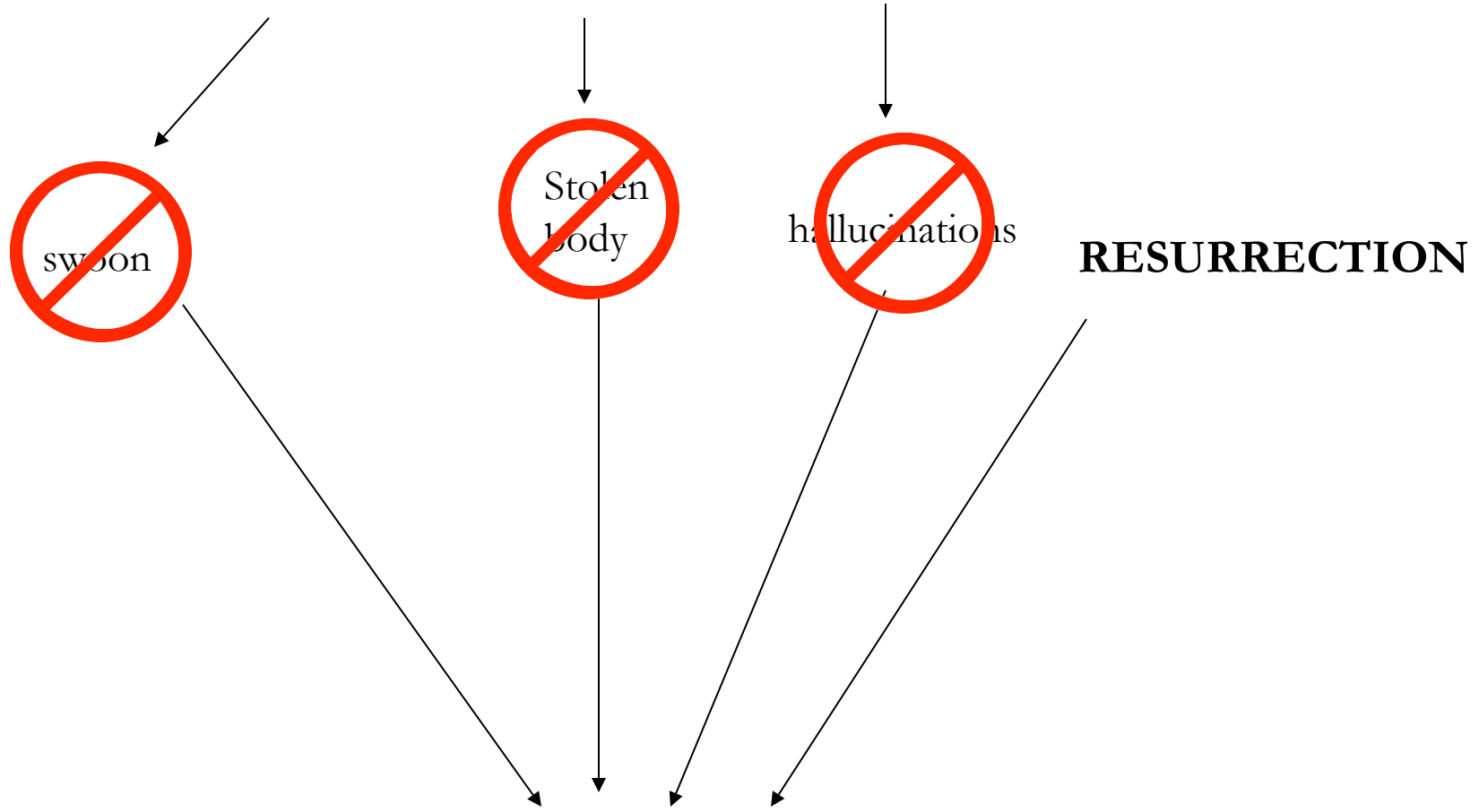
Some questions to ask about this argument:

1. How reliable are the data?
2. Are there other interesting hypotheses we need to consider? Are we in a position even to know which hypotheses are worth considering?
3. How much *explanatory power* does each hypothesis have?
4. What is the *prior probability* of each hypothesis?

Some general worries

- All of Craig's "data" are taken from the New Testament. If we treat the New Testament as we would treat any other ancient text, which of Craig's "data" will be left standing?
- We don't have to choose among the proposed explanations. There is also the possibility of admitting that *we don't (can't) know* what happened on Easter morning.
- Initially, it looks as if Craig applies a *double standard* in evaluating the various explanatory hypotheses, considering the prior probability only of hypotheses he wants to refute.

Background Information



Appearances
Empty tomb
Transformation of disciples

So what about the prior probability of miracles?

It's low, isn't it?

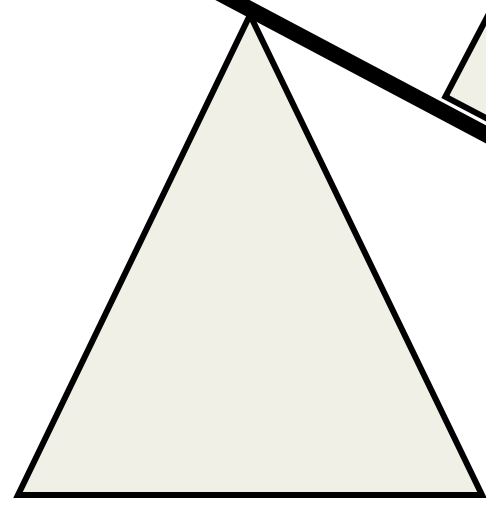
Low probability events do occur.

The question is whether the alleged resurrection of Jesus is an event of a type that is unlikely *ever* to occur.

Yes? Then Hume is right, and Craig is wrong.

Some old books say
that some people said that
a dead man came back to life.

**Dead men
stay dead**



Is Hume right?

Remember that the prior probability depends on *background evidence*.

What if your background information includes the propositions that God exists and ones about all the ways in which Jesus' life and ministry was special? *Then* how likely is it that miracles would be connected to the life of Jesus?

Some of Craig's specific arguments

On the reliability of the empty tomb stories

- Written down within the lifetime of many witnesses, who could have refuted them if they had been in error.
- Insufficient time for the development of a legend.
- Based on the testimony of women, who had no legal standing.

On hallucinations

- The disciples were not in the right psychological condition for having hallucinations.
- You can only hallucinate what's already in your cultural background. But nothing like the resurrection of Jesus was present in the Jewish background of the disciples.
- Doesn't explain the empty tomb.