

The Authority-Sampling Error

Quote Mining, Credibility Laundering, and the Stepping-Stone Fallacy in Theistic Argument

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Central claim

A critic’s isolated concession supports only what it says in context, within the critic’s relevant competence, and through a defended bridge to the apologist’s conclusion. When the critic’s broader position blocks that inference, a quotation may still establish a local premise, but the critic’s prestige cannot travel with it. This critique does not bar hostile witnesses or independent arguments; it rejects only credibility borrowed after the source’s controlling commitments have been withheld.

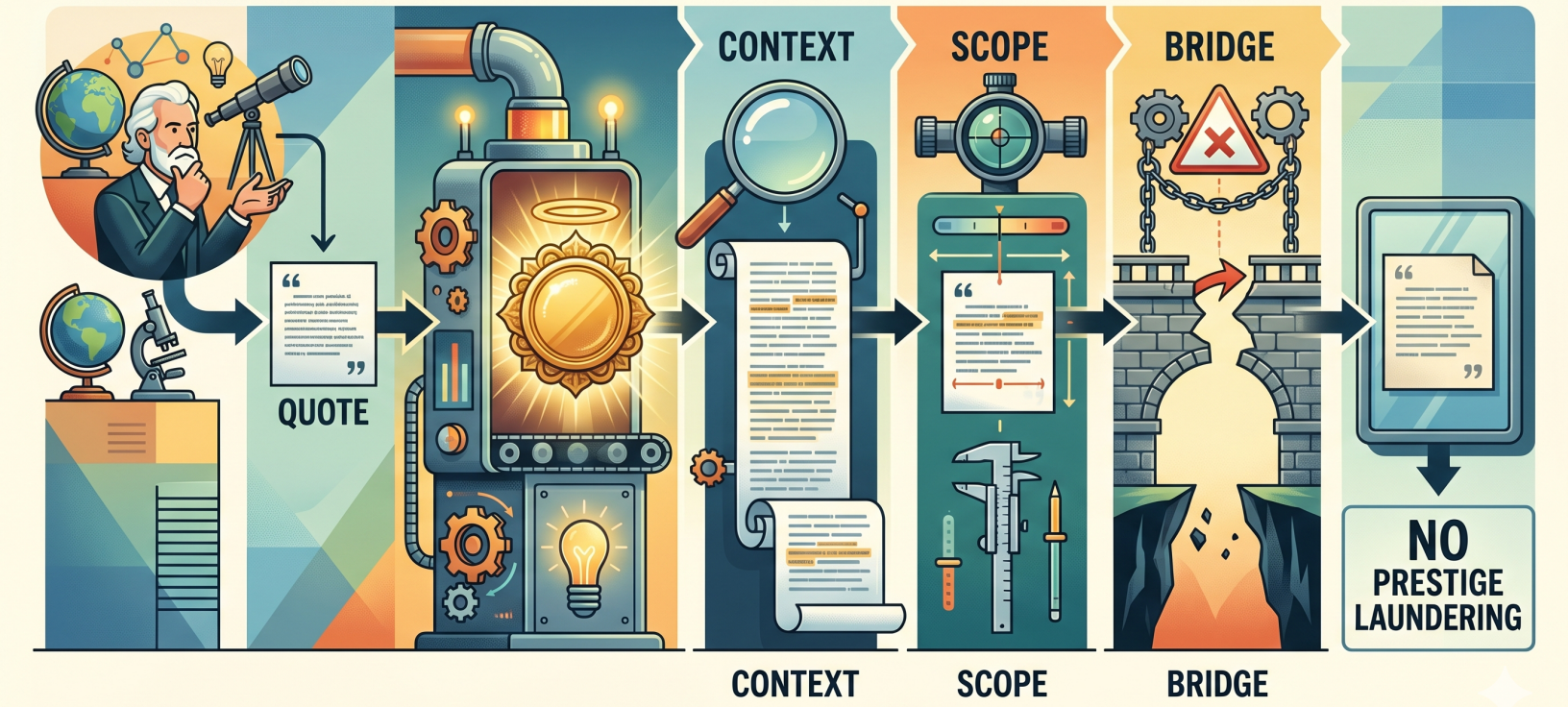
Preview:

Sampled fragment	Context and domain	Position and bridge	Rational result
A striking sentence from a respected critic appears to concede ground.	Preserve its role, qualification, modal force, and the speaker’s actual expertise.	Disclose any broader rejection and argue each step from the local point to the conclusion.	Keep whatever the quotation truly supports; transfer no authority across an undefended step.

The audit applies symmetrically. A fair quotation can contribute to an argument its source rejects, but then the independent bridge—not the source’s name—must do the additional work.

Visual preview:

THE AUTHORITY-SAMPLING ERROR



The inherited map sends a sampled quotation through the controls that borrowed prestige tends to bypass: context, scope, and a real bridge. Its broken span marks a failed inference, not a ban on quotation or testimony.

Abstract

Popular theistic arguments often recruit non-theistic or religiously heterodox authorities as “hostile witnesses.” A scientist’s awe, a philosopher’s criticism of reductionism, an agnostic’s uncertainty, or an atheist’s imagined possibility is presented as a stepping stone toward theism and sometimes toward Christianity. The central error is not always false quotation. It is the transfer of credibility from a source’s local statement to a conclusion the source did not support, while the context, domain limits, broader position, or inferential bridge that would constrain the move is omitted.

This paper calls the pattern the *authority-sampling error* and the resulting transfer *credibility laundering*. Work on testimony and expert opinion explains why authority can rationally matter; work on contextomy explains why selective quotation can distort even when the words are authentic. A four-part audit follows: domain fit, contextual stability, position disclosure, and bridge adequacy. Applied to familiar uses of Einstein, Darwin, Hawking, Dawkins, Sagan, and Nagel, the audit separates legitimate local contributions from illicit endorsement effects. Awe is not personal theism; uncertainty is not support; conceptual possibility is not probability; criticism of one naturalism does not identify a Christian God-concept.

The conclusion is bounded and constructive. A quoted authority may state a true premise and may even be mistaken about its consequences. In that case the apologist may defend an independent bridge and openly disagree with the source. What the apologist may not do is let the source’s prestige substitute for that bridge. Responsible practice preserves the exact proposition supported, discloses materially contrary commitments, distinguishes expertise from fame, and reports a conclusion no broader than the argument earns.

Keywords: Christian apologetics; expert authority; testimony; contextomy; quotation; credibility laundering; philosophy of religion

1 The Borrowed Witness

Theistic argument often seeks force from an unlikely ally. Albert Einstein’s religious vocabulary is made to sound like personal theism. Charles Darwin’s reluctance to claim certainty is made to sound like support for creation. Stephen Hawking’s discussion of laws is turned toward a lawgiver. Richard Dawkins’s willingness to imagine extraterrestrial designers is treated as openness to divine design. Carl Sagan’s wonder becomes spiritual longing, and Thomas Nagel’s attack on reductive materialism becomes a move toward theism.

Each use has an understandable rhetorical appeal. Agreement from a pastor reassures insiders; a concession from a famous critic appears to cross hostile territory. The critic’s name lowers the social risk of the premise and makes the destination feel less sectarian. A listener may remember not the precise claim but the association: Einstein, Darwin, Hawking, Dawkins, Sagan, and Nagel somehow point in the same direction.

Yet the cases are not one cumulative body of evidence merely because they can be arranged in a sequence. The thinkers address different subjects, possess different kinds of expertise, express different levels of confidence, and occupy incompatible philosophical positions. Their local remarks do not naturally form a path. The path is constructed by the person quoting them.

The paper’s intended audience is the Christian apologist who wants a hostile witness to contribute genuine evidence rather than borrowed atmosphere. Its governing thesis is simple: a quotation inherits no more authority than the proposition it faithfully conveys, and that authority reaches no further than an explicit argument carries it. If the source’s broader position resists the destination, the resistance does not automatically settle the debate. It does remove any right to present the source as though the source’s authority favored the destination.

The term *God-concept* will mean a specified conception of a deity, including its claimed character, actions, and relation to a tradition. The distinction matters because generic theism, a nonpersonal

cosmic order, deism, and the Christian account are not interchangeable hypotheses. Evidence that bears on one cannot be assigned to the others without additional premises.

The disclosure question

If a reasonable reader knew the quoted source's domain, nearby qualification, and considered conclusion, would the source still appear to lend the same authority to the apologist's conclusion? If not, the omission is evidentially material.

2 Why Authority Can Be Evidence

The remedy is not to treat every appeal to authority as a fallacy. Human knowledge depends pervasively on testimony. No person can reproduce all the observations, calculations, archival work, or specialized training behind responsible belief. Coady argues that testimony is fundamental to ordinary knowledge, and Hardwig shows why epistemic dependence is unavoidable in specialized inquiry (Coady 1992; Hardwig 1985). A refusal to rely on others would not make a thinker admirably independent; it would make most informed judgment impossible.

The real question is how testimonial support is bounded. Goldman asks how nonexperts can choose among purported experts when direct assessment of the underlying evidence is unavailable (Goldman 2001). Walton treats expert opinion as a defeasible argument—one that can be reasonable yet remains open to critical questions about competence, field, accuracy, agreement, evidence, and trustworthiness (Walton 1997). Ballantyne's account of epistemic trespassing supplies a related caution: genuine expertise in one area does not automatically authorize judgment in another (Ballantyne 2019).

These points explain both the value and the danger of the hostile witness. A physicist can be excellent evidence about a calculation in physics. That excellence does not turn every metaphor the physicist uses into expert theology. A biologist's autobiographical report can establish the biologist's state of mind. It does not settle metaphysics. A philosopher's case against one form of materialism deserves evaluation as philosophy. The philosopher's reputation cannot fill the gap between that criticism and a tradition-specific conclusion.

Authority therefore attaches to a relation: a person, a proposition, a domain, an evidential basis, and a communicative setting. Fame is not a portable epistemic substance. When the proposition changes, the domain changes, or the setting reverses the speaker's point, the original authority does not automatically survive the move.

3 Three Errors Often Collapsed into One

The phrase *quote mining* can hide three different failures. Separating them matters because a response that repairs one may leave the others intact.

3.1 Contextomy: changing what the sentence conveys

McGlone uses *contextomy* for selective excerpting that distorts a source's intended meaning and reports that the misleading first framing can continue to shape interpretation even after context is restored (McGlone 2005). The defect may arise through omitted sentences, an erased antecedent, a changed target, or removal of irony, contrast, or qualification. Verbatim words can therefore misrepresent. Quotation marks certify wording, not meaning.

Context is not an unlimited demand to reproduce an entire book. The relevant context is whatever a reasonable reader needs to identify the proposition, its force, and its role. A sentence offered as an objection should not be presented as the author's conclusion. A tentative possibility should not become

an endorsement. A metaphor should not be treated as technical doctrine. A concession made under a hypothetical assumption should not be detached from that assumption.

3.2 Scope inflation: changing who counts as an expert

A quotation can be contextually accurate and still receive excessive weight. Scientific achievement makes Einstein relevant to physics; it does not make his personal religious vocabulary an expert verdict in theology. Philosophical reputation can make Nagel an important interlocutor on mind and explanation; it does not make every reader's extension of his argument authoritative. The speaker may be worth hearing while the appeal to expertise remains out of scope.

The correction is not to silence prominent people outside their disciplines. Anyone may offer an argument, analogy, or autobiographical report. The correction is to identify the role correctly. Outside the relevant domain, the statement stands or falls mainly by its reasons. It cannot draw special force merely from the speaker's prestige.

3.3 Bridge elision: changing what follows

The most subtle case preserves both wording and local meaning. The source really does grant proposition P , and P may be true. The error appears when the source's name is allowed to support conclusion C without a defended route from P to C . A critic of reductive materialism may genuinely reject reductive materialism. It does not follow that the critic supports theism, still less Christianity. An agnostic may genuinely reject dogmatic atheism. It does not follow that the agnostic assigns positive evidence to a specified God-concept.

The source's disagreement with C is not itself a refutation. Authors can fail to see their own arguments' consequences. But once the apologist claims that the source is mistaken about those consequences, the authority relationship changes. The apologist must supply and defend the missing premises. The conclusion then rests on the apologist's argument, not on the source's endorsement. Keeping the prestigious name in the foreground after repudiating the source's interpretive discipline is credibility laundering.

4 The Four-Part Authority Audit

Olmos distinguishes the disclosure of testimony from its later use in argument and emphasizes that testimonial force is situated in that second practice (Olmos 2008). Building on that insight and the critical-question approach to expert opinion, four checks expose the authority-sampling error.

1. **Domain fit.** What exact proposition is the authority competent to assess? Is the citation being used for scientific, historical, philosophical, autobiographical, or rhetorical evidence? Distinguish specialized judgment from celebrity.
2. **Contextual stability.** Does the excerpt keep the same object, force, qualification, and argumentative role when restored to its source? Preserve distinctions among possibility, plausibility, probability, knowledge, and endorsement.
3. **Position disclosure.** Does the authority's considered view contain a material qualification, alternative explanation, or explicit rejection that would change how an ordinary reader hears the excerpt? State it before inviting the reader to infer support.
4. **Bridge adequacy.** What premises connect the local proposition to the intended conclusion? Are those premises independently defended, and do they select the stated God-concept over the live alternatives?

The tests have different verdicts. Failed context means the quotation should be repaired or withdrawn. Failed domain fit means the statement may remain an argument but loses special expert weight. A

contrary broader position requires disclosure, not automatic deference. A missing bridge limits the conclusion to the local proposition. Passing all four does not guarantee truth; it makes the authority use eligible for rational assessment.

The audit also distinguishes evidential roles. A source can provide data, define a concept, report personal belief, concede a premise, frame an objection, or endorse a conclusion. These roles are not interchangeable. Darwin is authoritative about what Darwin believed, though that autobiographical fact does not make him authoritative about the ultimate structure of reality. Hawking is authoritative about his cosmological proposal, though his proposal's success and its theological implications remain further questions.

5 Six Familiar Stepping Stones

The following cases are diagnostic rather than exhaustive. They show how different local contributions can be legitimate while a common prestige transfer remains illegitimate. The table does not settle every historical or philosophical dispute. It identifies the maximum claim the cited material can bear before an additional bridge is required.

Table 1: What familiar hostile witnesses can contribute—and what they do not contribute by authority alone.

Source	Legitimate local use	Material broader position	Bridge still owed
Einstein	Cosmic intelligibility and awe can be serious objects of reflection.	His religious vocabulary is often Spinozistic, nonpersonal, or metaphorical rather than Christian confession (Calaprice 2011).	Why intelligibility favors a personal deity, and then a specified Christian account, over nonpersonal or naturalistic explanations.
Darwin	His uncertainty and developing self-description are relevant biographical evidence.	His mature autobiography is better represented by agnosticism than Christian belief (Darwin 1958).	Why reluctance to claim certainty supplies positive support for creation rather than merely withholding certainty.
Hawking	Physical laws and cosmological models raise legitimate explanatory questions.	His joint account presents a non-theistic cosmological proposal rather than a concealed lawgiver argument (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010).	Why laws require a personal lawgiver and why that lawgiver has the attributes of the target God-concept.
Dawkins	Natural designers can be considered as a conceptual possibility for local biological phenomena.	An extraterrestrial designer would remain a natural entity needing further explanation in his framework (Dawkins 2006).	Why a possible natural designer confirms divine creation or supplies an ultimate explanation.
Sagan	Wonder, humility, and critical scrutiny can coexist and deserve cultivation.	His wonder operates within a sustained skeptical method toward supernatural claims (Sagan 1996).	Why a psychological experience of awe is evidence for the object a theistic interpretation assigns to it.
Nagel	Reductive materialism faces serious philosophical challenges.	His proposed alternatives are deliberately non-theistic and do not collapse into Christianity (Nagel 2012).	Why failure of one naturalism selects theism from the wider alternatives, then selects a Christian account from theisms.

The repeated lesson is not that the cited figures must be ignored. Their local claims may be true, their objections may remove complacent assumptions, and an apologist may extend their arguments. The lesson is that extension increases the apologist's burden. Each added step requires reasons proportionate to the specificity of the destination.

This is especially clear in the Nagel case. The space outside reductive materialism includes nonreductive naturalism, neutral monism, panpsychism, idealism, teleological naturalism, pluralism, deism, many theisms, and unresolved skepticism. Eliminating one member of that space does not identify another

without contrastive work. The same structure applies to Hawking: even if one argued successfully that physical explanation is incomplete, incompleteness would not by itself identify an agent, a personal deity, or a religious tradition.

6 Five Ways the Stepping Stones Mislead

6.1 Modal promotion

The easiest inflation moves from *possible* to *plausible*, from plausible to probable, or from entertained to endorsed. Philosophers and scientists routinely consider possibilities they reject. Charitable discussion would become impossible if every hypothetical concession were later reported as support. The quotation must retain its modal strength.

6.2 Complement-set collapse

Public argument often presents a binary stage: materialism or theism, evolution or creation, skepticism or faith. Defeating one visible option can then feel like victory for its opponent. But the logical complement of a view is rarely one rival. “Not reductive materialism” does not mean “Christian theism.” The alternatives erased by the binary are part of the evidential record.

6.3 Prestige migration

A name may enter the argument beside a proposition inside the person’s expertise and leave beside a conclusion outside it. The middle steps are heard under the glow of the original credential. This is not ordinary reliance on expertise; it is a change of domain without a change of rhetorical volume. The audit should mark exactly where expert authority ends and ordinary argument begins.

6.4 The cumulative mirage

A succession of famous names can simulate independent convergence. Yet six quotations do not form six evidence streams if each only establishes the same weak claim—that intelligent non-theists sometimes experience awe, reject simplistic reduction, or admit uncertainty. Nor are the citations independent when they are selected by the same search procedure for their usefulness to one conclusion. Nickerson’s review of confirmation bias gives reason to expect selective search and interpretation across many ordinary reasoning tasks; it does not uniquely indict religious readers (Nickerson 1998). The safeguard is reciprocal sampling: search each source for the strongest material qualification and ask whether the same standard would be accepted from a rival worldview.

6.5 Memory of endorsement

The most durable effect may be associative. A listener later remembers that a famous critic was “open” to the conclusion while forgetting that the quoted point was narrow. McGlone’s work on contextomy suggests why correction can be difficult: an initial framing can contaminate later interpretation (McGlone 2005). This makes disclosure timing important. The contrary position should accompany the quotation, not appear after the endorsement effect has done its work.

7 The Strongest Replies

7.1 A hostile witness can make a genuine concession

Yes. A critic may concede a factual premise, identify a problem, or refute an easy objection. Hostility can even reduce some concerns about friendly bias. The audit preserves that value. It asks the apologist to state the precise concession and stop attributing authority where the concession stops. A hostile witness who grants *P* is evidence that the witness grants *P* and may be evidence for *P* itself; the witness is not thereby an endorser of every *C* that another thinker builds from *P*.

7.2 An author can misunderstand the implications of an argument

Certainly. Intellectual history contains arguments whose later consequences exceeded their authors' intentions. If the apologist believes a source's premise entails something the source rejects, the proper response is a transparent disagreement: state the premise, state the source's contrary view, and defend the entailment. That procedure may produce a strong original argument. It cannot honestly be marketed as the source lending authority to the conclusion.

7.3 Short public communication cannot include every qualification

It need not. Materiality, not completeness, sets the standard. A short disclosure such as "Nagel rejects theism, but this particular criticism raises a further question" can prevent the central misimpression. Brevity becomes deceptive only when the missing fact would predictably change the audience's understanding of what the source supports.

7.4 Context complaints can become evasive

They can. A defender may bury a clear statement under irrelevant background or insist that no excerpt is fair unless the entire work is reproduced. The contextual-stability test blocks that maneuver: specify the proposition conveyed, then identify a concrete omitted feature that changes its object, force, qualification, or argumentative role. If the alleged context changes none of those, it does not defeat the use.

7.5 The criticism is selectively aimed at apologetics

The rule is symmetrical. Atheists also misuse believers' doubts, scientists' caveats, isolated scriptural passages, and local concessions. Political and commercial rhetoric uses the same device. The present focus is theistic argument because that is the paper's subject, not because the error belongs to one worldview. A Christian apologist should demand the same disclosure and bridge from critics and accept it for friendly sources.

8 A Better Practice

Responsible quotation begins by separating three questions: What did the source say? What does the source's expertise make that statement worth? What follows from the statement? A practical ledger can answer them before a quotation enters a talk, article, or debate.

Table 2: A compact authority-use ledger.

Audit item	Question	Required record	Failure response
Domain	What is the speaker competent to establish?	Exact proposition and relevant expertise.	Remove expert weight; assess the reasons directly.
Context	Does the excerpt preserve meaning and force?	Nearby text, original role, and modal status.	Expand, paraphrase fairly, or withdraw the quotation.
Position	Would a contrary commitment alter the endorsement impression?	Material qualification or rejection stated with the quote.	Disclose it before drawing the inference.
Bridge	Which premises connect the local point to the target?	Numbered steps, alternatives, and bounded conclusion.	Stop at the local result until the steps are defended.

Several habits follow. Quote the shortest passage that remains stable, not the shortest passage that sounds useful. Link to the primary source when possible. Label a speaker's role: expert testimony, autobiographical report, philosophical argument, illustration, or opponent concession. Distinguish the authority's endorsement from the apologist's extension. If the source's broader view rejects the extension, say so before the audience forms an endorsement impression.

Most importantly, make the bridge visible. Suppose an apologist begins with Nagel's criticism of reductive materialism and concludes that the Christian account is more credible. The argument must explain why the criticism favors theism over non-theistic alternatives, why it favors a personal over a nonpersonal account, and why it selects the Christian tradition over other theisms. A quotation cannot do this work in disguise. If the intermediate case succeeds, the result is stronger precisely because it no longer depends on ambiguity.

The same discipline improves cumulative arguments. Keep separate ledgers for separate propositions, note when sources depend on one another, and ask whether each item discriminates among the target and live alternatives. A collection of authorities can rationally converge when they independently support different premises in a valid or strong argument. A row of prestigious names does not converge merely by facing the same direction on a slide.

9 Conclusion

The authority-sampling error turns a limited contribution into an endorsement effect. Its characteristic move is not necessarily fabrication. It can use authentic words, accurate local propositions, and genuinely distinguished people. The failure occurs when a source's prestige is detached from the conditions that made the source relevant and then transported across an undefended inference.

Four controls prevent the transfer. Domain fit determines what the authority is competent to support. Contextual stability preserves what the statement means. Position disclosure prevents a local concession from masquerading as global alignment. Bridge adequacy makes the apologist's own premises carry the distance from the source's point to the intended conclusion.

The principal limit is important. A source may be wrong about what follows, and an apologist may supply a better argument. The source's contrary view is not a veto. It is a disclosure obligation and a boundary on borrowed authority. Once the apologist departs from that view, the departure must stand on reasons available to the reader.

The reader-facing question is therefore direct: if the famous name were removed, would the stated premises still carry the conclusion? If yes, present the argument and treat the quotation as a bounded contribution. If no, the stepping stone was prestige rather than evidence. Responsible apologetics should welcome hostile witnesses without conscripting them. Keep the insight; disclose the disagreement; build the bridge.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Ordinary-language reconstruction

- P1.** An authority's testimony supplies defeasible support only for a proposition the authority competently and contextually conveys.
- P2.** Support for a local proposition transfers to a further conclusion only through premises that adequately connect the proposition to that conclusion.
- P3.** When an authority's materially relevant broader position rejects or qualifies that transfer, the authority's prestige cannot count as support for the further conclusion unless the disagreement is disclosed and the connecting premises are defended independently.

- P4.** Authority sampling presents the local proposition while omitting one or more of those controls and allows the source's prestige to substitute for the missing support.
- P5.** Therefore an authority-sampled quotation supports at most its competently and contextually conveyed local proposition; it does not, by the authority's standing alone, support the apologist's further conclusion.
- P6.** The further conclusion may still be rationally defensible, but its defense must come from an explicit independent bridge rather than from borrowed authority.

The inference from P1–P4 to P5 and P6 is deductively valid as a constraint on authority-based support: if testimonial warrant is bounded by proposition, competence, and context, it cannot cross an additional inference without premises for that inference. P1 is an epistemological claim supported by work on testimony and expert opinion; P2 is a general inferential requirement; P3 is an interpretive and ethical constraint on the endorsement effect; and whether P4 describes a particular citation is an empirical judgment about that use. The conclusion does not show that the quoted proposition is false or that the apologist's destination is false. It shows only that the source's authority has not established the distance between them.

A.2 A worked bridge analysis

Consider a citation used to establish the local proposition that reductive materialism is inadequate. Let the intended conclusion be that a specified Christian God-concept is more credible. A valid route would need at least the following structure:

- B1.** Reductive materialism is inadequate.
- B2.** If reductive materialism is inadequate, then the live explanatory alternatives must be compared rather than collapsed into one rival.
- B3.** The relevant comparison favors the specified Christian God-concept over nonreductive naturalism, neutral monism, panpsychism, idealism, teleological naturalism, deism, rival theisms, and suspension of judgment.
- B4.** Therefore the specified Christian God-concept is more credible than it was before the comparison.

An authority who competently supports B1 has not thereby supplied B3. B2 actually prevents the common shortcut from B1 directly to B4. If the authority also rejects B3, that rejection does not make B3 false; it makes especially clear that the apologist must defend B3 without treating the authority as its sponsor. The same analysis applies when uncertainty about one evolutionary question is moved toward creation, when a physical law is moved toward a lawgiver, or when awe is moved toward personal theism. The local proposition can be retained while the unsupported transfer is refused.

A.3 Three distinct verdicts

The reconstruction yields three conclusions that should not be confused. First, a *quotation verdict* asks whether the source has been represented accurately. Second, an *authority verdict* asks whether the source's competence gives the local proposition special defeasible weight. Third, an *argument verdict* asks whether the local proposition and independently supported bridge justify the destination. A use may pass the first test and fail the second, or pass both and fail the third. Conversely, an independently strong argument may reach the destination even when the quoted source rejects it. In that final case the quotation remains a bounded premise, not an endorsement. These distinctions preserve the value of testimony while locating precisely where the apologist's own argumentative responsibility begins.

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