Love Without Objects

by Ryan Stringer

Imagine someone who claims to be full of love even though they love nothing in particular. You’d probably regard this claim as utter non-sense, and rightfully so, as love is always for some particular thing. In technical terms, love always has, and indeed must have, an object. But now suppose, as I believe, that we live in a godless world with no afterlife and no reincarnation: there are no gods or deities whatsoever, and whenever someone dies, that person is *really* dead. Our deceased loved ones don’t move on to a better or a worse place or position when they die; their conscious, sentient, thinking existence doesn’t transfer to a different realm or a different body. When our loved ones die, their conscious, sentient, thinking existence ceases entirely and they return, as Schopenhauer beautifully put it, to the blessed calm of nothingness.[[1]](#footnote-1) So what are we then to make of the love that some people have for God, or the love that others and I have for deceased loved ones? If the world were indeed a godless one with no afterlife and no reincarnation, then there would be nothing to which these instances of love actually attach—they would have no objects. Yet aren’t these cases of love without objects impossible given the above truism about love always having and needing to have an object? Isn’t there an inconsistency between that truism and these alleged cases of objectless love? It certainly seems so. Consequently, as a godless naturalist I appear to face the following, unpalatable dilemma: give up on the truism about love needing an object, reject cases of love for God and deceased loved ones as illusory, or admit that God and our deceased loved ones must exist after all because they’re objects of genuine love.

In fact, it’s tempting to think that we godless naturalists actually face a good argument against our atheism and our rejection of both the afterlife and reincarnation that goes something like the following. We cannot reasonably reject the truism that love needs an object because it makes no sense for love to have no object. We also cannot reasonably reject cases of love for God or cases of love for deceased loved ones as illusory, for even though one could insist that no one really loves God and that our love for others must necessarily die when its objects do, neither claim here is at all plausible. And it’s false to claim that people only love the idea of God or the idea of deceased loved ones rather than God or those loved ones themselves. These people aren’t in love with ideas—they’re in love with conscious, sentient, thinking beings. But since we can reject neither the truism that love needs an object nor those cases of love for God or for deceased loved ones as illusory, we must admit that both God and deceased loved ones exist after all because they’re genuine objects of love. We must also, in virtue of the truism about love needing an object, admit that all objects of genuine love—whatever they may be—exist as well.

Now this reasoning, as you may have suspected, is specious. We don’t need to admit that all objects of genuine love must exist in virtue of the truism about love needing an object because, if interpreted correctly, the truism that love must have an object is perfectly consistent with the possibility of love that lacks an actually existing object. Also, we godless naturalists can, with perfect consistency, maintain our atheism and our rejection of both the afterlife and reincarnation while agreeing that love needs an object and that some people genuinely love God and deceased loved ones so long as we interpret the truism that love needs an object correctly. The key, then, to reconciling this truism with the possibility of objectless love and to resisting the specious argument above lies in correctly interpreting the idea that love needs an object. So how should we interpret it?

As far as I can tell there are two possibilities here. The truism that “love must have an object” could mean either of the following:

1. Love must have *an intentional or a representational object*: the lover’s love is a psychological condition that necessarily rests upon or contains the representation of a beloved object that the lover takes to be an actually or a previously existing object.
2. Love must have *an actually existing object*: love necessarily attaches or corresponds to some actually existing object in the world.

And it should be evident that, if we interpret the truism along the lines of (2), then it would indeed imply that love cannot fail to attach to actually existing objects and that God and our deceased loved ones must exist because some people genuinely love them. It would also imply that other genuinely loved deceased things, such as my dead cats, along with other genuinely loved deities would have to exist as well. Yet all of these implications are absurd. My dead cats, sadly enough, do not still exist because I still love them, and love for deities or deceased individuals does not guarantee or imply their existence. Love can certainly fail to attach to actually existing objects. Interpreting the truism about love needing an object along the lines of (2), then, would render it false. It’s only when we interpret it along the lines of (1) that we get an actual truism about love, and so this is how we should interpret it.

And, by interpreting it in this way, we can see how, in the first place, it’s perfectly consistent with love that attaches to no actually existing object, such as the love for God or for deceased loved ones: love must indeed have a representational object, but there need be no actually existing object corresponding to the representational one. We can also see how interpreting the truism along the lines of (1) allows us godless naturalists to consistently maintain our atheism and our disbelief in both the afterlife and reincarnation while agreeing that love needs an object and that some people genuinely love God and certain deceased individuals. For love must indeed have an object in the sense that it must have a representational object, which we godless naturalists can and must accept. We can further accept both cases of love for God and cases of love for deceased loved ones as genuine cases of love because we can accept that at least some people genuinely have God as the representational objects of their love and that some people have their deceased loved ones as these objects.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, because these representational objects need not correspond to actually existing ones and indeed can exist without them, it may yet be true that there are no such actually existing objects (i.e., no actual beloveds), and so our atheism and our belief that there’s no afterlife and no reincarnation could still be true.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Arthur Schopenhauer, “On the Suffering of the World,” in *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This of course isn’t to say that these representational objects are our loved ones in the state of death. I’m instead trying to say here that some people have conscious, sentient, thinking creatures as the representational objects of their love even though, in actual fact, these creatures are now deceased. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I’d like to thank Cory Davia, Matthew Piper, and Dean Tracy for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)