

Creative Ambivalence

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Abstract:

Uncertainty is a multifaceted concept and phenomenon. One interesting effect of, or reaction to, specific situations of uncertainty is ambivalence. Like engaging with uncertainty is instrumental for the creation of new knowledge, I argue that ambivalence, when recognized and engaged with, bears the potential for creativity and productivity. To see this, I clearly identify the universally used but often little reflected upon concept of ambivalence as the simultaneous relevance of two opposing values or concepts. This definition then serves as the starting point for distinguishing ambivalence from other concepts it ostensibly has a similarity with, such as ambiguity, dichotomy and duality. In the course of this distinction we identify a constitutive openness within the concept of ambivalence that is at the basis of its potential for inspiration. This argument is then further refined and solidified by illustrating the process of ambivalence – which is in fact a dynamic operation – through calling on different theoretical and empirical approaches across disciplines: Michel Serres, Stephen Crocker and Sean Cubitt's productive noise; the transition from contradiction to enabling paradox à la Gilles Deleuze; the dialectical twist from negation to speculation of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel; ambivalent images and their psychological impact; and riding a bike. These illustrations allow ambivalence to defy its pejorative connotation by opening up the potential for creativity and productivity. Two examples for this potential on a cultural level from a place where people have repeatedly been exposed to ambivalent scenarios are the creativity boosts during the Newfoundland Studies movement and the “Newfoundland Renaissance.” I conclude by arguing that viewing ambivalence at this new angle encourages the explicit approval of and active engagement with uncertainties more generally.