



On Ambivalence: The Problems and Pleasures of Having it Both Ways (MIT Press)

Kenneth Weisbrode

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Why is it so hard to make up our minds? Adam and Eve set the template: Do we or don't we eat the apple? They chose, half-heartedly, and nothing was ever the same again. With this book, Kenneth Weisbrode offers a crisp, literate, and provocative introduction to the age-old struggle with ambivalence. Ambivalence results from a basic desire to have it both ways. This is only natural -- although insisting upon it against all reason often results not in "both" but in the disappointing "neither." Ambivalence has insinuated itself into our culture as a kind of obligatory reflex, or default position, before practically every choice we make. It affects not only individuals; organizations, societies, and cultures can also be ambivalent. How often have we asked the scornful question, "Are we the Hamlet of nations"? How often have we demanded that our leaders appear decisive, judicious, and stalwart? And how eager have we been to censure them when they hesitate or waver? Weisbrode traces the concept of ambivalence, from the Garden of Eden to Freud and beyond. The Obama era, he says, may be America's own era of ambivalence: neither red nor blue but a multicolored kaleidoscope. Ambivalence, he argues, need not be destructive. We must learn to distinguish it from its symptoms -- selfishness, ambiguity, and indecision -- and accept that frustration, guilt, and paralysis felt by individuals need not lead automatically to a collective pathology. Drawing upon examples from philosophy, history, literature, and the social sciences, *On Ambivalence* is a pocket-sized portrait of a complex human condition. It should be read by anyone who has ever grappled with making the right choice.

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