ABSTRACT. Regulatory bodies tend to treat people's emotional responses towards foods as a nuisance for rational opinion-formation and decision-making. This position is thought to be supported by such evidence as: (1) people showing negative emotional responses to the idea of eating meat products from vaccinated livestock; and (2) people showing positive emotional responses to Magnum’s ‘‘7 sins’’ marketing campaign. Such cases are thought to support the idea that regulatory communication about foods should abstract from people's emotional perceptions and that corporate marketing of foods should show restraint in capitalizing upon these weaknesses of the heart. This paper, on the contrary, argues that people's emotional perceptions of foods represent valuable sources of knowledge. This argument is developed by making the dominant reception of people's emotions intelligible by tracing its roots through the history of the Platonic paradigm. Although this paradigm has dominated the philosophical and psychological debate about emotions, the idea that emotions are sources of knowledge has recently gained force. This paper also traces the historical roots of the alternative Aristotelian paradigm. The cases of meat products from vaccinated livestock and Magnum’s 7 sins serve to illustrate this controversy. The paper concludes by showing that a neo-Platonic emphasis on the irrationality of emotions does not contribute to a fruitful discussion about implications of people's perceptions for agricultural and food politics, whereas a neo-Aristotelian account of rational emotions could enable regulatory bodies to engage people in a fruitful process of opinion-formation and decision-making about food production and consumption.

KEY WORDS: cognitivism, emotions, food, perception, rationality

1. INTRODUCTION

Regulatory bodies tend to treat people’s emotional responses towards foods as a nuisance for rational opinion-formation and decision-making in the
field of agricultural and food politics.¹ This position is thought to be supported by such evidence as: (1) people showing negative emotional responses to the idea of eating meat products from vaccinated livestock, although this technology is safe; and (2) people showing positive emotional responses to Magnum’s “7 sins” marketing campaign, although this “mood food” surely does not contribute to a healthy diet. Such cases are thought to support the idea that regulatory communication about foods should abstract from people’s emotional perceptions and that corporate marketing of foods should show some restraint in capitalizing upon these weaknesses of the heart. Contrary to this dominant position, this paper would like to argue that people’s emotional perceptions of foods are by no means irrational but rather represent valuable sources of (moral) knowledge.²

First, this argument will be developed by making the dominant reception of people’s emotions intelligible by tracing its roots through the history of the Platonic paradigm (Section 2).³ Although this paradigm has dominated much of the philosophical and psychological debate about emotions,⁴ recently the idea of emotions as valuable sources of (moral) knowledge gained force. Therefore, next, the historical roots of the alternative Aristotelian paradigm will be traced (Section 3). This brief discussion of the competing Platonic and Aristotelian paradigms for understanding emotions will serve as an introduction to the so-called cognitivism debate. Whereas Platonists emphasize the non-cognitive or bodily qualities of emotions, Aristotelians focus on the cognitive qualities of emotions. The cognitivism debate in understanding emotions is thus a more specific instance of the mind–body controversy in philosophy and psychology.

Next, an analysis of the apparently incomparable cases of meat products from vaccinated livestock (Section 4) and Magnum’s 7 sins (Section 5) will serve to illustrate this controversy about the rationality of emotions. The paper will conclude by showing that a neo-Platonic⁵ emphasis on the

¹ This paper prefers to talk about people instead of distinguishing between citizens and consumers (an overview of arguments for this preference is given in Dagevos and Sterrenberg (eds.), 2003).
² The paper will thus argue for a broader notion of rationality that includes thoughts and feelings, and movements of the mind and the body. However, it will at the same time insist that rational opinion-formation and decision-making are superior to drifting on the waves of irrationality.
³ It would be equally justified to coin this position the Jamesian paradigm after the so-called James-Lange theory of emotions (James, 2003 [1884]).
⁴ This paper uses the term “emotion” in a broad sense to cover emotions, feelings, passions, and so on. Although in other contexts it might be relevant to distinguish emotion in a narrow sense from other members of this conceptual family, for this paper’s purposes it suffices to use a rather loose concept of emotion.
⁵ Neo-Platonic here means contemporary thinking relating to the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato.