

3. Feeling food: The rationality of perception

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3.1 Introduction

The dominant reception among regulatory bodies of people's¹ emotional responses towards foods is that these responses are a nuisance for rational opinion-formation and decision-making in the field of agricultural and food politics. 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 perfectly safe; and 2) people showing positive emotional responses to Magnum's 7 sins, 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 capitalising upon these weaknesses of the heart. Contrary to this dominant position, this chapter 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

This argument will be developed by first making the dominant reception of people's emotions as utterly irrational intelligible by tracing its roots through the history of the Platonist paradigm in understanding emotions (section 3.2).³ Although this paradigm has dominated much of the philosophical and psychological debate about emotions⁴, recently the idea of emotions as valuable sources of (moral) knowledge gained forces. Therefore, next, the historical roots of this alternative Aristotelian paradigm will be traced (section 3.3). These historical introductions to the contesting Platonist and Aristotelian paradigms in understanding emotions thus serve as an introduction to the so-called cognitivism debate. Whereas Platonists emphasise 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 instantiation of the mind-body controversy in philosophy and psychology.

Then, an analysis of the apparently incomparable cases of meat products from vaccinated livestock (section 3.4) and Magnum's 7 sins (section 3.5) in terms of this controversy about the (ir)rationality of emotions will be given. Finally, the chapter will conclude by showing that a neo-Platonist emphasis on the irrationality of emotions does not contribute

¹ This chapter 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 chapter will thus argue for a broader notion of rationality that includes thoughts and feelings, 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.

⁴ This chapter 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 within this conceptual family, for this chapter's purposes it suffices to use a rather thick concept of emotion.

much to a fruitful discussion about possible implications of people's perceptions for contemporary agricultural and food politics. A neo-Aristotelian account of rational emotions, on the other hand, could enable regulatory bodies to engage people in just such a fruitful process of opinion-formation and decision-making about food production and consumption (section 3.6).

3.2 Irrational emotions: The Platonist paradigm

The dominant paradigm of emphasising the irrationality of people's emotions ultimately dates back to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato and runs through the Roman Stoics, the first modernist Descartes, the pragmatist psychologist James, the French existentialist Sartre to culminate in Griffiths' neo-Platonism. The basic idea of this Platonist paradigm, which still informs much of the regulatory unwillingness to seriously address people's emotional perceptions of food, is that emotions are 'erred judgements about the world, false and destructive ways of seeing life and its misfortunes' (Solomon, 2003: 31) and should thus be replaced with reason or rationality.

Plato argued that a sharp division should be made between the rational and the irrational parts of the human soul. He thus introduced the mind-body dualism in understanding emotions and treated emotions as irrational, uncontrolled bodily responses to situations. Similarly, the Stoics saw emotions as erred judgements about the world, false and destructive ways of seeing life and its misfortunes. They argued that emotions should be replaced with reason.

Descartes, elaborating on this line of thought, argued that emotions are feelings of physical agitation and excitement. Emotions are thus determined by bodily sensations and not thoughtful expressions of an autonomous mind.¹ He went on to distinguish between the strong souls of 'those in whom by nature the will can most easily conquer the passions and arrest the movements of the body which accompany them' (Descartes, 2003 [1649]: 26) and the feeble souls of 'those whose will does not thus determine itself to follow certain judgements, but allows itself continually to be carried away by present passions, which, being frequently contrary to one another, draw the will first to one side, then to the other, and, by employing it in striving against itself, place the soul in the most deplorable condition' (Ibid.: 27).

Although James (2003 [1884]) distanced himself from intuitive accounts of emotions as expressions of perceptions that in turn are expressed in bodily sensations, his counter-intuitive argument that perceptions are first expressed in bodily sensations and then in emotions remains well within the dominant Platonist paradigm.² His theory begins with a definition of emotions as perceptions of physiological disturbances caused by people's awareness of events and objects in their environment. He argued that the intuitive 'way of

¹ However, Descartes did not confine himself to a physiological analysis of emotions and seemed to be struggling towards a more cognitive understanding of emotions.

² It might seem strange, at first sight, to position a representative of American pragmatism within the Platonist paradigm. However, Jamesian non-cognitivism does reinforce the mind-body dualism in understanding emotions by emphasising the primacy of bodily sensations and his fellow-pragmatist Dewey forcefully criticised him for precisely that reason.

thinking about [...] emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression' (67). His thesis, on the contrary, is that 'the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion' (Ibid.). Thus, he concluded that a purely disembodied human emotion is a nonentity and that emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is inconceivable.

Sartre (2003 [1939]) resonated this Jamesian line of argument when he said that emotional consciousness is unreflective and that emotional behaviour is not effective. Hence, 'the origin of emotion is a spontaneous and lived degradation of consciousness in the face of the world' (195). Griffiths provides a recent account of this Platonist dismissal of emotions as irrational bodily states by arguing that 'emotions are introspective experiences characterised by a quality and intensity of sensation' (Griffiths, 2003 [1997]: 285). He defines emotions as affect programs: 'short-term stereotypical responses involving facial expression, autonomic nervous system arousal, and other elements' (288).¹

3.3 Rational emotions: The Aristotelian alternative

The alternative paradigm of emphasising the rationality of people's emotions also has a long history and ultimately dates back to the other great ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and runs through the Dutch sage Spinoza, the Scottish empirist Hume, economics' founding father Smith, the pragmatist philosopher Dewey to culminate in Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelianism.² The basic idea of this, in regulatory science unfortunately hitherto by-and-large ignored, Aristotelian alternative is that emotions are 'more or less intelligent way[s] of conceiving of a certain situation [...] indeed, sometimes more appropriate and insightful than the calm deliberations we call "reason"' (Solomon, 2003: 1).

Aristotle developed a conception of emotions as more or less intelligent ways of conceiving of a certain situation. He thought that emotions are often intelligent, indeed, sometimes more appropriate and insightful than calm rational deliberations. Like Plato, Aristotle divided the human mind into a rational and an irrational part. But unlike Plato, Aristotle did not make a sharp division between the two parts. He argued that they necessarily form a unity. He thus avoided distinguishing too sharply between the rational and the irrational elements of emotion. Similarly, he avoided treating emotions as irrational, uncontrolled responses to situations.

Likewise, Spinoza argued that emotions are a species of thoughts and that it is worthwhile to try to see through these emotions with reason.³ His emphasis on emotion and reason as intertwined entities is clear from remarks like '[d]esire is appetite with consciousness thereof' (Spinoza, 2003 [1677]: 35) and 'we deem a thing to be good, because we strive for it, wish for it, long for it, or desire it' (ibid.). He concluded, 'an emotion is the

¹ Griffiths has the cheek to suggest that the cognitive Aristotelian account of emotions, which he calls propositional attitude theories, has been the dominant paradigm in understanding emotions, whereas such a claim is obviously false about both academic and regulatory discourse.

² It is highly confusing that Nussbaum (2001) coins her own position as neo-Stoic, because she (unlike the Stoics) emphasises the rationality of emotions.

³ However, echoes of the Stoics are also strong in Spinoza's theory of emotions.

idea of a modification of the body [...] and must therefore [...] involve some clear and distinct conception' (42).

Hume (2003 [1739]), elaborating on this line of thought, argued that people are guided in their judgements of what is morally right and wrong by certain emotions of approval and disapproval, which he called moral sentiments. In defence of this position, Hume argued that if emotions did not play an important part in moral knowledge, people would never be motivated to do the right thing and to avoid the wrong. Thus, he said that emotions could be contrary to rationality only so far as they are accompanied with some judgement or opinion. According to him it is only in two senses that an emotion can be called irrational: 1) when an emotion is founded on the supposition of the existence of objects that do not exist, and 2) when in exerting an emotion in action, people choose means insufficient for the designed end. In short, an emotion or passion 'must be accompany'd with some false judgement, in order to its being unreasonable; and even then 'tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasonable, but the judgement' (53). Surprisingly enough, at least for neo-classical economic accounts of rationality, Smith held a similar position by stating that emotions are main threads in the fabric of social life, and that emotions seem to be especially designed for the purpose of motivating people towards morally good behaviour (Evans, 2002).

Dewey (2003 [1895]) argued - partly as a critique of the Jamesian non-cognitive account of emotions - that emotions are experiences of the world. Emotions are directed towards things in the environment that possess such emotional qualities as frightening, cheering, and saddening. He offered a three-part definition of emotion in which emotions are thought to include 1) a 'quale' or 'feel' (the feeling of fear, joy, sadness, etc.), 2) purposeful behaviour, and 3) an object that has an emotional quality. In other words, emotions have an object, and involve an attitude towards that object. He also thought that emotions are normally rational in content (i.e. adjusted to some end) and that emotions are 'a mode of behaviour which is purposive, or has an intellectual content, and which also reflects itself into feelings or affects, as the subjective valuation of that which is objectively expressed in the idea or purpose' (92). Again, emotion is always about or towards something and 'the adjustment or tension of habit and ideal, and the organic changes in the body are the literal working out, in concrete terms, of the struggle of adjustment' (97). This Deweyan line of argument emphasises that reason and emotion are always intertwined in behaviour, and that it is only (scientific) reflection that attempts to disengage them.

Nussbaum (2003 [1997]) provides a recent account of the Aristotelian appreciation of emotions as rational forms of (moral) knowledge by arguing that emotions are essentially judgements that can be rationally assessed. She believes that emotions are rational, not irrational. In other words, emotions are judgements about important things, judgements in which people acknowledge their neediness and incompleteness before those elements that they do not fully control.

Nussbaum, lists several features of emotions that gave rise to the Platonist paradigm:

'their urgency and heat; their tendency to take over the personality and move one to action with overwhelming force; their connection with important attachments, in terms of which one defines one's life; one's sense of passivity before them; their ap-

parently adversarial relation to 'rationality' in terms of cool calculation or cost-benefit analysis, or their occasionally adversarial relation to reasoning of any sort' (272-73).¹

Nevertheless, she holds it that emotions are forms of evaluative judgement that ascribe great importance to things and persons outside people's control. This implies that it is not true, like the Platonist paradigm would argue, that emotions are non-rational movements, unthinking energies that simply push people around, and do not relate to conscious perceptions. On the contrary, 'emotions [...] are about something; they have an object (275) and that object is 'an intentional object: that is, it figures in the emotion as it is seen or interpreted by the person whose emotion it is' (ibid.). Of course, this perception might contain an accurate view of the object or it might not. Moreover, 'emotions embody not simply ways of seeing an object, but beliefs [...] about the object' (276) and 'the intentional perceptions and the beliefs characteristic of the emotions [...] are all concerned with value' (Ibid.). The object of emotions is important for some role it plays in people's lives and emotions are thus concerned with people's flourishing. She concludes that emotions are a certain type of evaluative judgement with as common subject matter that they are concerned with vulnerable externalities: those that can be affected by events beyond people's control, those that can be destroyed or removed even when people do not wish it.

3.4 Meat products from vaccinated livestock

The first English and later Dutch outbreak of food-and-mouth disease in spring 2001 initiated a discussion about the possibility to sell meat products from vaccinated livestock on domestic European consumer markets. Although such meat products from vaccinated livestock are claimed to be perfectly safe for human consumption, retailers worried that people's irrational negative emotional responses would frustrate market prospects for these products. These retailers, therefore, concluded that information campaigns should bring people to their senses. However, would it not be possible to consider the alternative option that people's fear for chemical residues like vaccines in their foods somehow represents a valuable form of tacit knowledge?

A neo-Platonist non-cognitive account of emotions would suggest that people's negative emotional responses to meat products from vaccinated livestock are irrational and should be replaced with rationality in its modern version of natural scientific risk assessment.² If such a risk assessment process shows that eating meat products from vaccinated livestock is perfectly safe, information campaigns should be used to convince irrational consumers of this truth. A neo-Aristotelian cognitive account of emotions, on the contrary,

¹ It should be clear that these bodily and dangerous qualities of emotions do not need to be denied while emphasising the more reasonable qualities of these same emotions. Although it is quite understandable that Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelianism tends to ignore the non-cognitive aspects of emotions, after all she needs to argue for the rationality of emotions against the dominant current of emphasising their irrationality, a balanced neo-Aristotelian account should not reinforce but rather transcend the mind-body dualism in understanding emotions by emphasising the inextricable interconnectedness of the movements of mind and body.

² Notice that this emphasis on (natural) scientific rationality is a further restriction on the already narrow notion of rationality in the Platonist paradigm.

would ask what these negative emotional responses to meat products from vaccinated livestock tell about people's moral values with respect to livestock production. It would use the answers to this question as clues for potential adjustments to prevailing practices of livestock production. It would thus use - what Schön and Rein (1995) call - 'double vision' to listen to the moral knowledge embedded in people's emotional responses. This double vision does not ignore the relevance of scientific risk assessments but emphasises that other perspectives on - the broader context of - the issue at stake should be taken serious as telling another truth about, e.g., vaccinating livestock.

Chapter 4 presents the results of empirical research in which this question is asked. This study found that people's emotional responses to meat products from vaccinated livestock come in three different versions: a first category felt that non-vaccination was the preferable option, since it represents an agricultural practice that is in harmony with nature; a second category of perceptions equated vaccination of livestock with human vaccination, and argued that nothing was fundamentally wrong with preventive vaccination of livestock; and a third group of reactions associated vaccination with other life science technologies like cloning, which exemplify an agricultural practice that does not accept any limits to human control over nature. Such results show that once people's emotions are listened to and taken seriously, and a neo-Aristotelian account supports this whereas a neo-Platonist account tends to forswear it, these emotions will appear to represent valuable sources of (moral) knowledge that provide quite appropriate suggestions for adjustments to prevailing practices in livestock production. The kernel of these suggestions is that modern intensive livestock production somehow needs to be deindustrialised to regain positive emotional responses from a substantial portion of the consumer population in contemporary affluent countries.

3.5 Magnum's 7 sins

Unilever's introduction of the 7 sins as a new series of Magnum ice cream throughout Europe in spring 2003 reinforced the ongoing discussion about the responsibility of food companies to show a little restraint in playing on people's emotions in corporate marketing. Since Unilever intentionally played with ambivalence by presenting this rather fatty ice cream as bad and therefore good, this campaign has been accused of being immoral in view of the growing obesity epidemic in European countries.¹ However, would it not be possible that people recognise that it is not the unhealthy single food product but the healthy whole diet that counts?² Allowing oneself some indulgence could indeed represent a perfectly reasonable account of feeling good that escapes the dominant but one-sided regulatory risk discourse about food.

A neo-Platonist non-cognitive account of emotions would suggest that people's positive emotional responses to Magnum's 7 sins are irrational and should be replaced with rationality in its modern version of scientifically informed dietary advice. If nutrition sci-

¹ The campaign was also morally condemned as blasphemous by several Christian organisations (e.g. www.cftnederland.nl).

² Such recognition would approximate the position on dietary politics adopted by the Dutch 'Voedingscentrum' and other similar institutions throughout Europe.

ence shows that eating fatty ice creams does not contribute to a healthy diet, government regulation should stop food companies from producing and marketing food products that contribute to the growing obesity epidemic. A neo-Aristotelian cognitive account of emotions, on the contrary, would ask what these positive emotional responses to fatty ice creams tell about people's aesthetic or cultural values with respect to food consumption. It would use the answers to this question as clues for potential adjustments to prevailing practices of communicating dietary advice. It would thus use double vision to listen to the aesthetic or cultural knowledge embedded in people's emotional responses. This double vision does not ignore the disturbing obesity epidemic but also does not assume that the consumption of fatty ice creams is merely an expression of a 'false consciousness', to use a Marxist term, on part of ignorant consumers. It rather tries to understand the positive attributes of such products within contemporary patterns of food consumption. Such understanding is a prerequisite for any serious attempts to abate the negative unintended consequences of these consumption patterns.

Again, chapter 4 presents the results of an empirical study asking this question. Using projective methods in a focus group setting, it has been found that people's emotional responses to Magnum's 7 sins are to a very high degree characterised by ambivalence. Most people are simultaneously attracted by the pleasant experience of indulging in the consumption of these ice creams and more than fully aware that consumption of these ice creams does not contribute to a healthy diet. Unlike the marketing message of Unilever that the 7 sins are bad and therefore good, people perceive of these ice creams as at once bad and good. Such results show that once people's emotions are listened to and taken serious, and a neo-Aristotelian account supports this whereas a neo-Platonist account tends to forswear it, these emotions will appear to represent valuable sources of (aesthetic or cultural) knowledge that provide quite appropriate suggestions for adjustments to prevailing practices in dietary advice. It suggests, for instance, that dietary advice might be better attuned to the aesthetic or cultural pleasures of food consumption by converting from a 'no unless' towards a 'yes but' message. Moreover, it suggests that regulatory bodies should not be afraid to learn playing with ambivalence from corporate marketing.¹

3.6 Conclusion

Two broad conclusions may be drawn from the preceding analysis of the so-called cognitivism debate in understanding people's emotions. These conclusions imply a call to broaden the Platonist paradigm with an Aristotelian account as a necessary condition for meaningful public deliberations about people's emotional perceptions of foods.

Firstly, if people's emotional responses to foods are not immediately dismissed as irrational, like the Platonist paradigm suggests, this would enable regulatory bodies to acknowledge that agricultural and food politics cannot restrict itself to a preventive risk discourse but also needs to address the broader and more positive attributes that play a cru-

¹ The ITV drama 'Fat Friends' shows how playing with ambivalence might do more good than apocalyptic moralising in view of the obesity epidemic. It also shows that playing with ambivalence does not need to be at odds with being 'honourable about food' (cf. slogan Voedingscentrum).

cial role in people's intersubjective perceptions of food quality.¹ Regulatory bodies should thus try to learn playing with ambivalence as routinely practiced in corporate marketing (cf. Klein, 2000; Nijs en Peters, 2002).

Secondly, and probably more important, a neo-Aristotelian perspective would allow regulatory bodies to escape their permanent state of denial, which incapacitates them to envision a meaningful conversation about people's emotions beyond the idea to initiate information campaigns in a doomed attempt to replace false emotional judgements by correct rational considerations.² Aristotelian premises would allow ample room for the refreshing idea that people's negative emotional responses towards, e.g., the foot-and-mouth crisis might not be irrational at all. The method of listening with 'double vision' would at least consider the possibility that these responses are serious indicators that something is terribly irrational, in a moral sense, about the treatment of animals in intensive livestock production and thus offer clues for possible adjustments to prevailing production processes. Hence, emphasising the rationality of perceptions would allow regulatory bodies to build on people's emotions as sources of moral knowledge in a meaningful dialogue about food production and consumption.³

¹ This issue already gained widespread attention in terms of the so-called experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

² The problem with such information campaigns is not only that they are based on false premises - they are also notoriously ineffective.

³ However, it should not be denied that sometimes people's emotions do not provide appropriate stepping stones for a meaningful discussion, i.e. in times of 'hypes' or 'scares' the Platonist emphasis on the bodily and dangerous qualities of emotions is probably more accurate (see Van Ginneken, 1999 and also see section 6.1). This implies that the Aristotelian and Platonist paradigms in understanding emotions are not so much incommensurable alternatives but two sides of the same coin. In fact, the inextricable interconnectedness of mind and body in understanding emotions should already be emphasised in a balanced neo-Aristotelian account that transcends mind-body dualism in a more fundamental way than advocated by its most influential contemporary spokesperson (Nussbaum).