

# Do the Standards of Rationality Depend on Resource Context?

Abstract: People sometimes knowingly undermine the achievement of their own goals by, e.g., playing the lottery or borrowing from loan sharks. Are these agents acting irrationally? The standard answer is “yes”. But, in a recent award-winning paper, Jennifer Morton argues “no”. On her view, the norms of practical reasoning an agent ought to follow depend on that agent’s resource context (roughly, how rich or poor they are). If Morton is correct, the orthodox view that the same norms of practical rationality apply to all agents needs revision. I argue that Morton’s arguments fail on empirical and philosophical grounds. What’s at stake? If Morton is correct, poverty-relief agencies ought to re-design their incentives so resource-scarce agents can rationally respond to them. If I’m correct, resource-scarce agents do act irrationally in the cases under discussion, and we shouldn’t be shy about saying so. Instead of declaring them rational, we should try to understand the causes of their irrational behavior and help them better succeed by their own lights.

Keywords: Rationality, Reasons, Ecological Rationality

## 1. Introduction

Poor people often knowingly and voluntarily act in ways that frustrate the achievement of their own goals. They prefer not to be poor, and yet they often play the lottery, borrow money at exorbitant interest, fail to take tax incentives intended to help them out of poverty, and so on. None of these behaviors reliably promote their goals. Quite the opposite. We usually think that, when an agent knowingly and voluntarily frustrates the achievement of their own goals, they are guilty of (practical) irrationality. Are poor people, or resource-scarce agents,<sup>1</sup> who knowingly and voluntarily undermine their own interests acting irrationally? Proponents of ideal rationality answer: yes.<sup>2</sup> But Jennifer Morton (2017), in her recent award-winning paper, answers: no.<sup>3</sup> Morton argues that such behaviors can be (and often are) rationally permissible when they are permitted by norms of reasoning

---

<sup>1</sup> A resource-scarce agent is an agent who typically lives in resource-scarce conditions. Resource scarcity is constituted by “a relatively narrow gap between the resources available to the agent in her context and those necessary to satisfy her ends” (Morton 2017, p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> This is a large group. Among them are Michael Bratman (1987), Christine Korsgaard (1996), John Rawls (1971), and many (perhaps most) economists.

<sup>3</sup> The paper won the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*’s “best paper” award for 2017.

that typically serve the agent well in her resource-scarce environment. And such short-sighted behaviors, Morton argues, usually do serve those agents' interests. If she is correct, then ideal rationality—which condemns these actions as irrational—is in need of revision.

This paper is a defense of ideal rationality. I begin, in section two, by briefly describing Morton's criticisms of ideal rationality and her proposed revision to it. I argue that Morton fails to provide compelling reasons for rejecting it. In sections three and four, I argue that Morton's appeals to social psychological evidence about the behavior of agents in resource scarce conditions does not support her revision. In section three, I defend the hypothesis that, in many cases, resource scarcity *causes* agents to be irrational. In section four, I defend the hypothesis that, in other cases, what appears to be irrationality on the part of resource-scarce agents is no such thing—that agents instead experience a reversal of preferences that makes their behavior rational, even by the standards of ideal rationality. In section five, I argue that Morton's case against ideal rationality relies on empirically dubious assumptions about resource-scarce agents' ability to switch between short-term and long-term modes of reasoning. If I am correct, then Morton has not provided compelling reason to abandon ideal rationality for her proposed revision.

On my view, resource-scarce agents often *do* act irrationally, and we shouldn't be shy about saying so. We do them no favors by declaring them rational when they undermine their own aims. Indeed, it seems crucial for understanding precisely how to help these agents that we understand the causes of their irrational behavior and seek to intervene in ways that will better help them succeed. Though I think that these agents often act irrationally, this does not imply that we ought to blame them (at least, not very much) for their irrational behavior. Since it is significantly more difficult to deliberate correctly in resource-scarce conditions than resource-moderate conditions, we ought to withhold (most of) the blame that we would ordinarily apply to resource-moderate agents.

## 2. Ideal Rationality vs. Ecological Rationality

Defenders of ideal rationality endorse something like the following meta-norm:<sup>4</sup>

**Ideal Rationality:** An agent  $A$  should deliberate using those norms  $N$  that ( $A$  reasonably believes) allow her to best achieve her ends  $E$ , given her cognitive capacities.<sup>5</sup>

If Ideal Rationality is correct, it explains why a whole host of behaviors that seem irrational are, in fact, irrational. It explains, for example, why it is irrational (in most circumstances) to procrastinate, shoot oneself in the foot, refuse to pay one's parking tickets, refuse to take large tax credits requiring minimal paperwork, or to be akratic. In each case, the agent fails to do what she (reasonably) believes would best achieve her ends. In fact, in these cases, she knowingly *frustrates* the achievement of those ends.

Morton rejects Ideal Rationality because it entails, among other things, that poor people often act irrationally when they knowingly act in ways that promote their short-term goals at the expense of their long-term goals. Morton finds this verdict of irrationality implausible and argues that, despite appearances, poor people are usually making no mistake in these cases. On her view, an action is rationally permissible if it proceeds from a mode of reasoning that it is appropriate to use in one's *usual* context. And since the mode of reasoning poor people employ is the kind of short-term focused reasoning that generally serves them best in their resource-scarce contexts, it is rationally permissible for them to act as they do. This short-term mode of reasoning, Morton argues, is appropriate for resource-scarce agents even in those (supposedly) rare cases in which engaging in such reasoning undermines the achievement of that agent's own ends and that agent knows it.

---

<sup>4</sup> I call it a "meta-norm" because it's a norm that governs when one ought to use other norms in deliberation. Ideal Rationality is not itself a first-order norm of deliberation.

<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, it doesn't matter whether defenders of ideal rationality endorse the version according to which agents are required to deliberate using norms that *actually* best promote their ends or the version according to which agents are required to deliberate using norms they *reasonably believe* best promote their ends. Morton rejects both views, since neither says that the norms an agent ought to use in deliberation depend on resource context.

In support of her view, Morton appeals to recent empirical literature suggesting that being in a resource-scarce environment changes an agent's habits of reasoning such that they become especially good at short-term reasoning but worse at long-term reasoning. She cites a study of 464 sugarcane farmers in 54 villages in rural India whose income varied during the harvest cycle—low income before harvest, high-income after. Researchers compared the effects of scarcity on the same farmers' fluid intelligence (using Ravens Matrices) and cognitive control (using the Stroop Test) before and after the harvest cycle.<sup>6</sup> After controlling for nutrition, stress, and work fatigue, they found that, before the harvest, farmers solved fewer Ravens Matrices, were slower to solve the Stroop test, and made more errors than they did when tested after the harvest. The researchers conducted a similar study on high- and low-income shoppers at a New Jersey mall. They primed shoppers with financial concerns before giving the tests. Low-income shoppers primed to worry about some large expenditure before the tests did worse than similarly primed high-income shoppers (and worse than low- and high-income shoppers who had not been primed). Even when the researchers offered financial incentives to the primed low-income shoppers, they still performed worse overall.

A second set of experiments, however, demonstrated resource-scarcity's positive influence on short-term reasoning. Researchers recreated scarcity in the lab by having participants play a game called Angry Blueberries—similar to Angry Birds.<sup>7</sup> The participants in the resource-moderate group were given more shots than the participants in the resource-scarce group. Some participants were also given the option of borrowing from later rounds, while others were not. Participants who were given fewer shots were more efficient per shot, from the very first shot, than those who were given more

---

<sup>6</sup> A Raven's Matrix is intended to test problem-solving skills. A subject is asked to select a picture to complete a pattern given by a series of pictures. A Stroop test is intended to measure cognitive control. A subject is asked, for example, to name the color of a series of letters that spell the name of some other color. Subjects must exert cognitive control when they face the mismatched stimuli.

<sup>7</sup> Angry Birds is a smartphone or iPad video game in which participants accumulate points by launching cartoon birds (angry about being launched in the air) at a group of targets. The more targets participants knock down with their finite supply of birds, the more points they accumulate. Angry Blueberries is the same except participants launch blueberries, not cartoon birds, at targets.

shots. Participants in the resource-scarce group, however, tended to borrow more than those who had more resources, and often in a way that undermined their own (supposed) goal of winning the game. The more focused the resource-poor were on the current round, the more they neglected (and borrowed away from) future rounds.

The lesson we should learn from this empirical work, Morton argues, is that resource-scarcity affects agents' problem-solving and cognitive control skills in a way that enhances their short-term reasoning but inhibits their long-term reasoning. In her view, this is no accident. Agents' habits of reasoning conform to this pattern because short-term reasoning best helps them achieve their goals.

If this is correct, it would explain why it is rationally permissible for agents in resource-scarce conditions to reason habitually in ways that prioritize their short-term goals over their long-term goals. And if it is rational for agents to reason in these ways, Morton argues, then it is rational when they act in accord with these norms even in those cases in which prioritizing short-term over long-term goals does not, in fact, help agents best achieve their ends. Thus, Morton endorses what she calls

**Ecological Rationality:** An agent  $A$  should deliberate using those norms  $N$  that allow her to reliably achieve her ends  $E$ , given her cognitive capacities, in those contexts  $C$  in which she regularly finds herself (p. 12).

Ecological Rationality differs from Ideal Rationality by maintaining that which mode of reasoning is rational for an agent depends on her resource context. Ideal Rationality, by contrast, is meant to apply to all agents across all resource contexts.

To see clearly how the two views of rationality come apart consider Morton's case of Herb:

Herb is in a debt trap. He borrows money at exorbitant interest month after month. If he claimed a tax credit for which he's eligible, stopped buying lattes, and avoided getting parking tickets (which he could do), he'd be out of debt and he knows this. He prefers to be out of debt to living as he currently is (p. 1).

Is Herb irrational for buying lattes, not claiming his tax benefit, and not moving his car to avoid parking tickets? Defenders of ideal rationality say: yes, this is a textbook case of practical irrationality.

Morton says: no. Again, this is because the short-sighted mode of reasoning that leads Herb to engage in the behaviors described above usually best serves Herb's interests, given his resource-scarce context.

### 3. Does scarcity lead to irrationality?

If Morton is correct that the norms of practical rationality that apply to agents depends on their resource context, then this will require a significant change to our standard theory of practical rationality. Is the proposed revision well-motivated? Defenders of ideal rationality think not. They think there are ways of explaining the behavior of resource-scarce agents, in the cases Morton describes, that doesn't require any such revision. Morton considers several of these hypotheses but rejects them all. In this section, I consider the hypothesis that resource scarcity leads to irrationality. In the next section, I consider the hypothesis that resource scarcity can lead agents to change their preferences from achieving their long-term goals to achieving their short-term goals. I conclude that Morton's rejection of both hypotheses is unjustified.

Morton begins her case for Ecological Rationality by rejecting the hypothesis that scarcity leads to irrationality. A defender of ideal rationality might explain the behavior of resource-scarce agents, in the cases Morton describes, by suggesting that being in resource-scarce conditions is likely to *cause* agents to act irrationally—i.e., in ways that undermine the achievement of their own goals. For example, when a large proportion of an agent's cognitive resources are devoted to worrying about where their next meal is going to come from, or where they can sleep safely through the night, they have far fewer cognitive resources to devote to careful deliberation. Thus, it is no surprise that they often act in ways that undermine their long-term goals. No one could be expected to deliberate or act as well in these difficult conditions as they would if they had more time and were under less pressure.

Morton, however, rejects the hypothesis that scarcity leads to irrationality for two reasons. First, she thinks that ideal rationality should “have more to say” about the cases she describes (e.g.,

the case of the rural Indian farmers, the Angry Blueberries experiment). Second, she thinks that when we say that resource-scarce agents often act irrationally we “dismiss” their deliberation. She writes,

I think that we should resist accepting [that scarcity leads to irrationality] before we have considered alternative explanations. At the very least, it is a point in favour of an alternative theory if it has something more to say about these cases. Furthermore, we have an additional reason to resist brandishing the label of ‘irrationality’ to dismiss the deliberation of people in resource-scarce conditions. Philosophers who write about rationality are, for the most part, fortunate enough not to be in the resource-scarce conditions with which we have been concerned. We have time and resources that allow us to deliberate using norms that align more closely with those sanctioned by ideal rationality. We should be wary of automatically importing those ‘intuitive’ assumptions into contexts that are very different from ours (p. 8).

First, it’s not clear why a theory of rationality is required to have anything to say about agents who act irrationally (other than that they act irrationally). No one thinks that Utilitarianism or Kantianism is deficient for not having anything to say about why people fail to maximize utility or fail to conform their maxims to the categorical imperative. No doubt, the adherents of Utilitarianism and Kantianism can (and do) offer such explanations. They appeal to self-interest, or akrasia, or the power of our inclinations, or the fact that people have false moral beliefs, or whatever. But these explanations are no part of the normative theories themselves. And no doubt is cast on the moral norms described by these ethical theories simply because they have nothing more to say about murderers than that they act wrongly. The same is true of ideal rationality. It’s no shortcoming of ideal rationality that it doesn’t explain why people often behave irrationally. Certainly, defenders of ideal rationality can offer explanations about why people often act irrationally. But that is precisely what we are doing now in suggesting that resource-scarcity causes irrationality. The suggestion is that people in resource-scarce conditions deviate from Ideal Rationality, because it is difficult to regularly conform to *any* norms (e.g., moral norms, legal norms, norms of etiquette) when one is living in very difficult conditions that require a large portion of one’s cognitive resources.

Second, Morton suggests that we should “resist brandishing the label of ‘irrationality’ to dismiss the deliberation of people in resource-scarce conditions” (p. 8). Here Morton seems to conflate charges of irrationality and blame. It is one thing to consider a person’s behavior, reach the judgment that they knowingly failed to efficiently promote their own ends, and on that basis judge that they acted irrationally. It is quite another thing to blame them.

Consider the analogy with morality again. An act-utilitarian can (and many of them do) hold that there are instances of blameless wrongdoing. For example, I may be a committed utilitarian deliberating about whether to give an enormous sum of money to charity A or charity B, correctly conclude that giving to A would do just barely more good than B, but give to B because my brother sits on the board of charity B. In giving to B rather than A, I knowingly acted wrongly, since I knew that giving to B would fail to maximize net utility. But act-utilitarians can, and likely will, hold that I should not be blamed, and indeed that I am not blameworthy, since it is all-things-considered best to withhold blame. After all, blaming me would likely discourage me from giving to charity in the future, and that would result in a net loss in utility.

The same is true for adherents of deontological views. If there is a man at the door hoping to murder my friend, I may judge (correctly, let us assume) that it is wrong to lie to him about my friend’s whereabouts and yet lie to him anyway. In doing so, I knowingly act wrongly. But deontologists may reasonably conclude that I am not blameworthy—or, at least, that I deserve very little blame—given the difficulty of my circumstances. If this is correct in the case of morality, then there is no reason to think that the same could not be true of rationality.

Negative evaluations of rationality (just like negative evaluations of morality) need not entail blame. And even if negative evaluations of rationality do entail blame, they need not entail a significant amount of blame. On the hypothesis under consideration—namely, that resource scarcity leads to irrationality—it would indeed make most sense (at least most of the time) not to blame agents who



knowingly undermine the achievement of their own goals as a result of living in difficult conditions. Thus, proponents of ideal rationality can accept that resource-scarce agents often act irrationally without “dismissing their deliberation” or “brandishing the label of ‘irrationality’.” If so, then Morton hasn’t provided compelling reason to reject the straightforward hypothesis that resource-scarcity causes irrationality. And if that hypothesis is true, then no revision to Ideal Rationality is called for.

#### 4. Does scarcity change agents’ ends?

There is another way defenders of Ideal Rationality might explain the seemingly irrational behavior of resource-scarce agents. They might agree with Morton that agents in resource-scarce contexts often do *not* act irrationally, even when they prioritize their short-term goals over their long-term goals, but that is because resource scarcity causes agents’ goals to change. On this view, being in resource-scarce conditions cause a person to care more about her short-term goals than her long-term goals—even if, at one time, her preferences were reversed. For example, it seems plausible that agents in resource-scarce conditions care more about buying food than paying off debt or saving for college, even if, at one time, they cared more about paying off debt and saving for college.<sup>8</sup> If so, then these agents aren’t acting irrationally by the standards of Ideal Rationality when they prioritize their short-term over their long-term goals. So no revision to Ideal Rationality is called for.

Morton rejects this hypothesis because she thinks that, if we embrace it, we will never be able to attribute irrationality to anyone. She writes,

[W]e shouldn’t assume that, because agents in conditions of scarcity pursue their short-term goals at the expense of their long-term goals, they in fact prefer or value the former more. Of course, in some cases that might be true, but we are not warranted in drawing this conclusion merely on the basis of the agent’s behaviour. If we did, we would be reinterpreting all violations of the instrumental principle as not genuine

---

<sup>8</sup> Notice that this hypothesis doesn’t compete with the hypothesis that resource scarcity leads to irrationality. Each hypothesis could be true but for different agents. It could be that some agents act irrationally as a result of being in resource-scarce conditions, while others experience a preference reversal (so that they care more about their short-term than long-term goals) and therefore do not act irrationally by the standards of Ideal Rationality.

violations because the agent is, in fact, doing what she most desires when she acts contrary to her avowed ends. But, as Christine Korsgaard [1997] argues, this sort of argument leads to an account of rationality that is not genuinely normative since no violations of the instrumental principle are even possible (pp. 8-9).

But this is mistaken. We are not bound to interpret *all* apparent violations of the instrumental principle—i.e., the principle according to which we are rationally required to take (what we justifiably believe to be) the necessary means to achieve our ends—as a mere change in preferences (and thus not irrational). Rather, the suggestion is this. If an agent *usually* obeys the instrumental principle, but violates it on a particular occasion, then we can attribute irrationality to her. If, however, the agent habitually acts in ways that violate the instrumental principle, then it is plausible that the agent's preferences have shifted. If so, then we need not treat all apparent violations of the instrumental principle the same. There is room for us to say that some agents act irrationally, even if some of them do not because they experience a reversal of preferences.

Morton also rejects the preference reversal hypothesis because, in her estimation, the empirical evidence doesn't support it. She writes,

If we follow this line of argument [that agent's behavior is explained by preference reversal], we should conclude, for example, that in the Angry Blueberries or Family Feud experiment the resource-scarce participants experience a preference-reversal such that they prefer to do well at each shot (or turn) more than they prefer to win at the overall game. This is counter-intuitive (p. 9).

But it's not counterintuitive at all. If participants in the (very artificial) lab experiment can see that they haven't been given enough shots to win the Angry Blueberries game (as the resource scarce agents were not), then it is perfectly reasonable for participants to respond as follows: "Well, I guess I can't win this thing. I guess I'll just do my best this round." The same is true of the Family Feud game.<sup>9</sup> If

---

<sup>9</sup> Family Feud is a game in which participants compete, under time constraints, to name the most popular answers to questions asked to survey participants. Prior to the game, surveyors will ask one hundred people a host of questions such as "What's something that might be salty?" and then record the responses, ranking them by their popularity. Contestants in the Family Feud game will then be asked "What's something that is salty?" When contestants guess, they are hoping to name the most popular answers. The more popular the answer in the survey, the more points awarded to the contestant who guesses that answer.

you haven't been given enough time to answer all of the questions asked of you, then, upon realizing this fact, it makes perfect sense to say "Well, I can't possibly win this thing. I guess I'll just do my best to answer the question being asked of me right now." If this is correct, then there is nothing counterintuitive about the suggestion that participants' preference for winning the game over doing well in a particular round changed upon discovering that they couldn't possibly win the game. Thus, Morton hasn't provided compelling reason to reject the preference-reversal hypothesis either. She therefore hasn't provided compelling reason to abandon Ideal Rationality.

If what I've argued in this section and the previous one is correct, then Morton fails to provide sufficient reason to reject the alternative hypotheses about why resource-scarce agents often violate (or appear to violate) Ideal Rationality. But it's worth noting that, even if Morton did succeed in showing that each hypothesis, *on its own*, does not fully explain resource-scarce agents' behavior, that would not show that the two hypotheses do not *jointly* explain their behavior. Morton doesn't even attempt to show that the various explanations she considers could not be combined to fully explain the phenomenon at issue. Thus, Morton fails to demonstrate that Ideal Rationality has some deep flaw that would justify making her proposed revisions.

## **5. Can agents switch between short-term and long-term reasoning?**

Morton is interested in defending Ecological Rationality because it supports the claim that resource scarce agents are not irrational when they knowingly undermine the achievement of their own aims. Herb's case is central to Morton's case for supporting this conclusion. But does Herb's case really support that conclusion? In this section, I argue that it doesn't, since the Herb case rests on empirically dubious assumptions about resource-scarce agents' ability to switch between short-term and long-term modes of reasoning.

Morton argues that, even though Herb prefers being out of debt to having a latte, and even though Herb knows that he could get out of debt in part by not buying the latte, nevertheless, Herb is not irrational for buying it. Morton agrees that Herb is knowingly undermining the achievement of his own goals. She agrees that it would be *better* if Herb did not buy the latte. But she denies that he is irrational—again, because Herb’s short-term mode of reasoning usually serves him well. And his decision to buy the latte is licensed by his usual short-term mode of reasoning.

But why should it matter that Herb’s short-term mode of reasoning usually serves him well? Shouldn’t Herb be able to see *now* that acting in accord with his usual norms of reasoning will lead him to undermine his own goals? And if so, isn’t knowingly undermining one’s own goals sufficient for irrationality? Morton suggests that switching from the usual short-term mode of reasoning to long-term reasoning, on a particular occasion, is not open to Herb (or resource-scarce agents more generally). Since norms of practical reasoning are neither transparent to us, nor up for revision on a regular basis—they “run in the background”, as it were—Herb cannot simply abandon his usual mode of short-term reasoning for the clearly better long-term mode of reasoning appropriate for his current situation. And since Ecological Rationality says that an agent ought to use the norms of reasoning that best promote her ends in her context and *given her cognitive capacities*, Herb makes no rational mistake when he fails to switch to long-term reasoning in his current context. Thus, crucial to Morton’s case for her distinctive view is the following empirical claim.

**No Switching:** It is extraordinarily difficult for agents to switch from short-term to long-term reasoning (or vice-versa), on a particular occasion, when doing so would best promote their own ends.

What support does Morton offer for No Switching? The support is the empirical data suggesting that resource-scarce agents very often act in ways that prioritize their short-term over their long-term goals. Morton’s suggestion is that these agents regularly promote their short-term goals, to the neglect of their long-term goals, because their context makes short-term reasoning their best

policy. And it is extraordinarily difficult for them to switch from short-term to long-term reasoning when doing so would best promote their ends.

But this data offers only minimal support for No Switching, since it's compatible with the claim that, often enough, resource-scarce agents *do* act in ways that prioritize their long-term over their short-term goals. And it's plausible that, as a matter of fact, resource-scarce agents often do prioritize their long-term over their short-term goals when doing so best promotes their ends—even if their habitual mode of reasoning prioritizes their short-term goals. For example, most resource-scarce agents don't abuse very pleasurable but highly addictive illegal drugs, or sell illegal drugs (which is known to be very profitable), or shoplift on a regular basis, or engage in violence against their enemies or rivals, and so on. Each of these behaviors is often highly beneficial in the short-term, but destructive in the long-term. Certainly, *some* resource-scarce agents engage in these behaviors on a regular basis. And perhaps the proportion of resource-scarce agents who engage in these behaviors is higher than the proportion of resource-moderate agents who do so. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of resource-scarce agents do not engage in these behaviors. Why not?

Here's one hypothesis: Even if these agents have a habit of prioritizing their short-term over their long-term goals, they can see—as clearly as any resource-moderate agent can—that these behaviors are very bad for them in the long-run. Thus, they refrain from engaging in these behaviors. If this is true, then resource-scarce agents very often—as often as they're faced with the opportunity to engage in these short-sighted behaviors—switch from short-term to long-term reasoning.<sup>10</sup> Thus, No Switching is false. It is not extraordinarily difficult for resource-scarce agents to switch from their habitual short-term mode of reasoning to long-term reasoning—they do it all the time.

---

<sup>10</sup> This assumes, of course, that the correct way to individuate modes of reasoning is in terms of short-term and long-term. This could (and probably should) be challenged, but I will not challenge it here, since I want to show that, even by Morton's own standards, she does not offer sufficient support for No Switching.

If this much is correct, then it is appropriate to accuse Herb of irrationality when he knowingly fails to prioritize his long-term goals (which are more important to him) over his short-term goals. After all, he could easily switch to long-term reasoning and refrain from buying the latte. And that is true of resource-scarce people more generally. Again, whether we ought to *blame* Herb and similar agents in these cases is a separate question. It's compatible with everything that I've said that Herb and similar agents deserve no blame whatsoever, or very little blame.

If what I've argued in this section is correct, the Herb case does not support the claim that resource-scarce agents are not guilty of irrationality when they knowingly undermine their own aims. Ecological Rationality supports that claim only if it's very difficult for agents to switch between short-term and long-term reasoning. But I've argued that that empirical claim is false. It's not difficult for resource-scarce agents to switch modes of reasoning in this way—they do it all the time.

## 6. Conclusion

I've argued that Morton's arguments for abandoning Ideal Rationality in favor of Ecological Rationality fail on both empirical and philosophical grounds. I'll conclude with the political upshot of embracing Ideal Rationality, as I've suggested we should. Morton argues that, if her view is correct, government agencies who hope to help poor people out of poverty ought to re-design their incentives and penalties so that resource-scarce agents can rationally respond to them. But this point can be accommodated by defenders of Ideal Rationality. If we know the ways that resource-scarce agents regularly act irrationally, and why they do so, then government agencies can design their incentives to account for this fact—either by *exploiting* predictable failures of rationality to benefit resource-scarce agents or at least by not offering incentives and penalties that will reliably be ignored by them because of resource-scarcity-induced irrationality. (Which of these is preferable will depend on one's more

general views about the ethics of paternalism and “nudging”.) In any case, it is not as though those hoping to benefit poor people must accept Morton’s view in order to do so.

## References

Bratman, M. (1987). *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Korsgaard, C. (1996). *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morton, J. (2017). “Reasoning Under Scarcity”. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 95 (3): 543-559.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.