Rubenstein opens her book with a view of the refugee camps established in Zaire following the Rwandan genocide. Camps which at once both housed legitimate refugees, génocidaires, and "ex-FAR" members "seeking to regroup, and rearm." Camps which were also kept afloat by a large presence of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) who provided a steady stream of food, water, medical care, and shelter to its inhabitants. The INGOs working in these camps knew their aid was being siphoned off by FAR rebels, and consequently, that their presence and work effectively enabled the militarization of these camps. From this ethical predicament Rubenstein is driven to ask how INGOs should navigate the unintended negative effects that so often accompany their well-intentioned behavior. In trying to answer this question Rubenstein has produced a theoretically and conceptually rich text which often reads like a thorough set of prescriptions for INGO best practices. As readers, we are often told what INGOs should do, and how they should react, in a highly specific set of circumstances that in the book's aggregate cover the full gamut of possible ethical predicaments INGOs have faced—and are likely to face—in their daily practices. I do not take these prescriptions, however, to be the book's main contribution. Rather, the prescriptions Rubenstein outlines follow naturally but are not integral to what I identify as the more important question being not "what should INGOs do?" but instead "what kind of actors are humanitarian INGOs?" (207). Three subset questions follow: how do we as scholars and analysts conceptualize INGOs; how are they identified and treated by donors; and finally, how is their role-identity perceived and understood by the individuals who actually work in—and run—these organizations?

The book begins by challenging the eight extant approaches to conceptualizing and normatively evaluating INGOs, which Rubenstein argues "actively mis-describe humanitarian INGOs' activities, relationships, capacities, and/or effects" (50). The scholarly landscape to-date has, in Rubenstein's terms, failed to see INGOs for what they truly are—the culmination of their identities and practices—and as-such scholars are incapable of properly evaluating the ethical and political terrain in which INGOs operate. Just as Rubenstein challenges how the eight extant approaches conceive of INGOs, she likewise advances her own map of INGO political ethics by resting it on a reconceptualization of INGOs as sometimes somewhat governmental, highly political, and often second-best actors (52). Accordingly, seeing INGOs for the kind of actors they truly are is both the avenue through which alternative explanations are debunked, and on which Rubenstein's own reconceptualization of INGO political ethics ultimately rests.

What are the implications of this reconceptualization and what does it tell us about the broader relationship between actors' actual and self-perceived role-identities, and their ability to properly recognize, and respond to, their ethical consequences and environment? One constant tension in the book is how INGOs' self-perception of themselves as (a)political often clashes with the objective political consequences of their actions. As Rubenstein explains:
[b]eing morally motivated actors dedicated to saving lives and alleviating suffering [...] is central to humanitarian INGOs’ self-understanding and public self-presentation. But the fact that humanitarian INGOs operate in a highly politicized [context] means that they—and their observers—should not put too much emphasis on their intentions. (201)

It is only by recognizing their governmental, political, and second-best features that INGOs can properly deal with the ethical consequences of their actions, but this may come at the cost of their own self-identity and thus suggests the development of a potentially powerful ontological security dilemma. Rubenstein captures this quite well, but also very briefly, in her attention to the “moral whiplash” of INGO decision-makers and donors (94).

There is a heavy prescriptive element to the book, delineating a path that INGOs should follow as they come into contact with the problem of spattered hands, the quandary of the second-best, the cost-effectiveness conundrum, and the moral motivation tradeoff. Being able to even see this path, however, requires first being able to locate INGOs in the middle ground “between samaritans and states,” and thus being able to reconceptualize INGOs (208). Rubenstein convincingly charts this path for scholars and analysts, guided as we are by the helpful hand of Mill, Simmons, Dryzek and Niemeyer, Walzer and others. The book, however, devotes less time to the question of how INGOs can make these transitions for themselves, or whether it is even crucial that they do so. In the conclusion Rubenstein provides a way forward, suggesting that the critical mechanism for change may not hinge on INGOs themselves, but instead on their donors. Rubenstein asks us to imagine a donor who had previously viewed INGOs as (a)political “do-gooding machines”, but now recognizes their place in the middle ground between samaritans and states (216). “What might this donor do differently, Rubenstein asks, and “how might she think differently, with regard to donating to INGOs?” (216). In this way Rubenstein has set the groundwork for future research.