In *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs*, Jennifer Rubenstein presents a thorough examination of the kinds of unique ethical dilemmas faced by humanitarian INGOs. Rubenstein’s intuition that normative and ethical dilemmas are linked to particular constitutive dimensions of these INGOs presents a distinct approach to ethics. She argues that the kinds of ethical choices that INGOs face follow directly from the kind of political actor they represent, such that we cannot understand the normative dimensions of INGO politics without understanding their political nature. In this sense, Rubenstein is consistently walking the line between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ claims. If it is the case that INGOs are a certain kind of political actor, then it follows that they *ought* to behave a certain way. Bridging the gap between constitutive and normative also allows Rubenstein to set up the need for a reexamination of the ethics of INGOs. Rubenstein is correct to note that INGOs are neither “swashbuckling heroes, and do-gooding machines” nor “naïve miscreants and cold self-interesting corporations.” The need for a balanced approach is apparent. While the link between the constitutive and the normative presents a major contribution to ethics in international relations, the link often gets lost. As such, the following critiques focus around the idea that despite Rubenstein’s emphasis on the unique nature of humanitarian INGOs, this distinct quality is not always clear.

Rubenstein argues that INGOs should take a consequentialist approach when sorting through ethical dilemmas and “interpret consequences expansively.” As such, democratic norms are only as valuable their political effects. However, conceptually and logically, it is unclear why certain normative injunctions follow from specific constitutive dimensions. For example, Rubenstein asks: “What responsibilities do humanitarian INGOs have as a result of engaging in somewhat governmental basic service provision?” Her answer to this question relates to the idea that INGOs are often guilty of “rug-pulling,” where they deprive communities of the aid that they have come to rely on. The danger of “rug-pulling” can justify continued operations by INGOs despite possible negative effects. According to Rubenstein, this responsibility arises from the consequences of INGOs actions rather than a “narrowly-defined humanitarian imperative.” The problem with this view is that the dilemma of rug-pulling is not unique to INGOs, which is something that Rubenstein would agree with insofar as she argues that INGOs are “somewhat governmental.” But in saying that INGOs are somewhat governmental, Rubenstein actually delinks the constitutive from the normative in that there is nothing unique about INGOs as political actors. Rug-pulling is a dilemma that a lot of political institutions have to deal with, so how can we say that humanitarian INGOs require a unique set of ethical understandings? While Rubenstein provides some basis on which INGOs are governmental (basic service provision, influencing government policies, and making large-scale decisions about resource use), the notion that humanitarian INGOs are unique is lost. As such, “governmental” seems like the wrong concept to use. Additionally, even though the dilemma of rug-pulling can create a responsibility for the INGO to continue operations, they often justify leaving anyways, as
in the example of different justifications given by Medicins San Frontieres and Oxfam in Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire. If the same ethical dilemma (that of spattered hands) can be used to justify two very different policies, then what is the purpose of using this ethical framework?

Methodologically, this discussion demonstrates the difficulties of marrying a constitutive and normative project. Rather than allaying the tension between “is” and “ought” concerns, the reader is led to see them as inconsistent with one another and possibly incommensurable in that there is not always a clear logical connection between the constitutive elements of a political entity and its normative behavior. Its politics all the way down. Rubenstein comes closer to the unique constitutive nature of INGOs when describing their global governance activities and their discursive political power but these sections take a backseat to conventional governance functions.

Another accomplishment of the book is to lead the reader to think through variation between INGOs. Rather than implicating all INGOs of being a part of a repressive or neocolonial international structure, Rubenstein asks the reader to think through better and worse ways of conducting humanitarian projects. The argument that INGOs face distinct dilemmas based on the consequences of the specific options available to them is very helpful. I ultimately link this argument with Rubenstein’s larger claim that existing normative frameworks are not as engaged with political judgment as the normative frameworks she presents. Rubenstein provides thorough reasoning differentiating her normative claims. However, while I agree that there are probably better and worse INGO ethical practices, some of her normative injunctions seem to go beyond the purview of a single organization, or even group of organizations working in the same conflict zone. For instance, while describing the “Misuse of Power #3: Cultivating and Retaining the Capacity for Arbitrary Interference,” she notes that the “capacity to interfere arbitrarily is objectionable on egalitarian grounds because when A had the capacity to interfere arbitrarily with B, B has an incentive to ‘toady’ and ‘fawn’ to A, in order to stay on A’s good side.” This capacity creates incentives for vulnerable groups and their representatives to work with INGOs that they would not work with if they had a choice. While I agree that this capacity is in fact an abuse of power, it is not limited to particular INGOs. Instead, fighting this abuse of power requires broad structural change in the way that INGOs conduct global governance. As such, it may not be helpful to link the capacity to interfere with the individual political judgment of an organization.

One of the most compelling suggestions of the book, is that instead of being less political, INGOs should actually be more political. This claim is not quite explicit but interspersed throughout. It did not become clear until the chapter on the “cost-effectiveness conundrum.” In order to address the cost-effectiveness conundrum, Rubenstein prescribes the “ethics of resistance” which require INGOs to explain their decisions about resource use which opens them up to challenge. The main implication of the ethics of resistance is that INGOs need to be more political and pragmatic in their justifications rather than hanging onto humanitarian principles of duty. Rather than striving for objectivity, INGOs should practice more political judgment and engage in the necessities of democratic discourse, opening themselves up to challenge. This claim is particularly helpful and actually leads me to see the value in linking the normative and constitutive, even though this approach did present some conceptual challenges.