This book is a normative treatise on global inequality. The statistics are well-known: the poorest 46% of humankind have 1.2% of the global income, while the richest 15% have 80%. Moreover, every day 50,000 persons – of which 34,000 children – die due to poverty-related causes that could easily be prevented by better nutrition, save drinking water and appropriate medicines. Thomas Pogge starts by asking why we, citizens of affluent democratic societies, do not find it morally troubling that half of humankind lives in severe poverty, despite our enormous economic and technological progress, and the fact that the world is dominated by our enlightened liberal values (3). The question is whether we have a responsibility towards the globally worst-off, and the literature provides us with three kinds of answers. Peter Singer and Peter Unger present a moral argument: there are people in serious need and we can help them without making serious sacrifices so we should help them, regardless of whether we are responsible for their plight or not. John Rawls defends the view that, although we might have a duty to assist “burdened societies” to overcome their “unfavorable conditions,” we have no responsibility for poverty in many developing countries because it is caused by the incompetence, corruption, and tyranny entrenched in their governments, institutions and cultures.

Pogge gives a third possible answer and presents a committed defense that Western governments and their citizens have a negative duty to relieve the deplorable situation of the globally worst-off. Although he does not deny the responsibility of the rulers and elites in developing countries, he primarily focuses on our responsibilities towards the globally worst-off. He argues that our governments impose a coercive global order that perpetuates severe poverty for many who cannot resist this imposition: “we and our governments participate in [a global order] depriving them of the objects of their most basic rights” (23).

*World Poverty and Human Rights* is a collection of Pogge’s essays on global justice, written between 1990 and 2001. The argument in the book can be divided in three main parts. The first two chapters discuss foundational issues: a conceptualization of human flourishing, a defense of a minimal conception of justice in terms of basic goods, and a description of the concept of human rights as used throughout the book. In the second part Pogge emphasizes the lack of correspondence between the minimal moral standards of any coercive national order and those standards we use in discussions on global justice. In three chapters he refutes three different arguments that deny the responsibilities of Western affluent societies towards the global poor. The last three chapters present policy proposals that, so Pogge argues, provide feasible institutional changes that will improve the lot of the globally worst off. Chapter six
defends measures that support fledgling democratic governments by constraining the power of previous undemocratic rulers to incur debts in their county’s name. Chapter eight describes a proposal in which governments must pay a small part of the revenues of using or selling the natural resources extracted from their territory to a global resources dividend (comparable to the Tobin Tax). These revenues are redistributed to the global worst off to insure that they can meet their own basic needs with dignity (196-197).

The chapters discuss a large variety of issues, but the central thought can be summarized as follows: we, the governments and citizens of affluent democracies, have a negative duty not to uphold a global structure that violates human rights (67, 145, 172). Pogge’s position can be characterized as ‘moral institutional cosmopolitanism.’ Let me elaborate this characterization by explaining the constituting parts. First, Pogge explicates a moral instead of legal notion of human rights (53). His defense is inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially art. 25 – claiming that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being – and art. 28 – claiming that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms of the UDHR can be fully realized. Secondly, Pogge understands human rights not in an interactional but in an institutional way:

On the interactional understanding of human rights, governments and individuals have a responsibility not to violate human rights. On my institutional understanding, by contrast, their responsibility is to work for an institutional order and public culture that ensure that all members of society have secure access to the objects of their human rights. … By postulating a human right to X, one is asserting that any society or other social system, insofar as this is reasonably possible, ought to be so (re)organized that all its members have secure access to X (64-65).

Pogge explicitly understands human rights in an institutional way: human rights are primarily claims against coercive social institutions, and secondarily claims against individuals that uphold (and benefit from) such institutions. Finally, Pogge’s defense is a cosmopolitan one, centering “on the fundamental needs and interests of human beings and all human beings,” (178) and emphasizing “that every human being has a global stature as an ultimate unit of moral concern” (169).

Pogge’s claim that we are not merely failing to help the global poor but actually harming them, needs an additional argument, establishing our responsibility for their fate. Central in this argument is the existence of a global order, in which all national governments participate, along with international and supranational institutions like the UN, EU, NATO, WTO, World Bank, and IMF. To show why this global world order generates injustices Pogge presents three disjunctive arguments, addressing the adherents of three different strands of Western political thought. First, shared institutions. States are interconnected through a global network of market trade and diplomacy. This shared institutional global order is shaped by the better-off, and imposed on the worse-off. We impose a global institutional order that foreseeably and avoidably reproduces severe and widespread poverty. This order is unjust if there is a feasible institutional alternative under which such severe human rights deprivations would not persist. (199-201). Second, uncompensated exclusion. The better-off enjoy significant advantages in appropriating wealth from our planet, such as the use of a single natural resource base like crude oil. The worse-off are largely, and without compensation, excluded from the gains of this appropriation (201-203).
Third violent history. The inequalities in the social starting positions of the better-off and the worse-off have emerged from a single historical process that was pervaded by massive, grievous wrongs, such as a history of conquest and colonization with oppression and enslavement (203-204).

Pogge concludes that poverty in developing countries cannot be seen as disconnected from our affluence. The existing global order, and the injustices it generates, implies that we violate a negative duty not to harm the global poor, that is, not to violate their basic human rights. This negative duty implies that Western governments should not impose an institutional order under which, foreseeably and avoidably, individuals lack secure access to some of the objects of their human rights. Pogge criticizes the foreign policy of Western societies, and especially their policies that shaped the global order, for having pushed their self-interest to the extreme. He gives some examples: the negotiation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (125) and the WTO-regime (15-19), and concludes that:

Our new global economic order is so harsh on the global poor, then, because it is shaped in negotiations where our representatives ruthlessly exploit their vastly superior bargaining power and expertise, as well as any weakness, ignorance, or corruptibility they may find in their counterpart negotiators, to shape each agreement for our greatest benefit (20).

His complaint against the WTO regime is not that it opens markets too much, but that it opens our markets not enough and thereby gains for us the benefits of free trade, while withholding them from the global poor (19). The idea that we might only have a humanitarian duty is thus beside the point. We are harming the global poor by imposing an unjust global order, in which Western societies close their markets by protectionist policies, massively subsidize the local agriculture, and introduce anti-dumping measures in many of the sectors where developing countries are best able to compete, like agriculture, textiles and clothing.

The existing global institutional order is neither natural, nor God-given, but shaped and upheld by the more powerful governments and by actors they control such as the EU, NATO, WTO, OECD, World Bank, and IMF. The current global order produces a stable pattern of widespread malnutrition and starvation, and there are alternative regimes possible that would not produce similarly severe deprivations (176). It is the negative duty of Western governments to aim for a global order under which basic human rights are not violated, that is, a global order in which all individuals are able to meet their basic social and economic needs. Of course, national governments primarily focus on the interests of their own citizens, but they should not do so at the expense of gross human rights violations abroad. Indeed, they can improve the circumstances of the globally worst-off and meet the demands of justice without becoming badly-off themselves.

In sum, the negative duty of Western governments consists in forgoing their maximum results in international negotiations, for as far as this generates human rights violations. In theory this sounds very convincing, however, it remains unclear what this implies in actual negotiations. Which proposals are reasonable and which proposals, will, in the end, violate basic human rights?

The negative duty of individual citizens in affluent democracies consists in making reasonable efforts towards promoting institutional reform. They bear a collective responsibility for their governments’ role in designing and imposing this global order and for their governments’ failure to reform it towards greater
human-rights fulfillment (172-173). Again it remains implicit in Pogge’s argument what this negative
duty actually implies for individual citizens: when can one be sure to have made reasonable efforts
towards promoting institutional reform? More in general one could conclude that Pogge spends more
energy in defending the claim that Western governments and citizens have a negative duty towards the
global poor, then in fleshing out what this duty implies in actual situations.

I have only given a sketchy presentation of Pogge’s arguments; of course, his full presentation is more
persuasive. The strength of the book is the result of three elements: philosophical rigor, a compelling and
provocative style, and much relevant factual support. The book is written in a non-technical style and is
very accessible for non-philosophers. Even those who are usually not convinced by normative arguments
will be fascinated by the many different ways in which Pogge defends his claim. Even those that do not
embrace his final conclusion will be compelled by many of his examples, analogies, and arguments.

Nevertheless, I expect that World Poverty and Human Rights will not persuade most readers of the LJIL
as legal scholars. Pogge’s focus on moral instead of legal arguments, his emphasis on individual needs
and interests instead of relations between states, might not be convincing. The final chapters, defending
‘practical’ proposals might even strike them as straightforward unrealistic. Finally, one could argue that
his emphasis on the global world order as the main source of global inequality is a one-sided judgment.
For one thing, the possible unjust legacy of colonialism (the violent history argument) only concerns the
countries involved, and does not have to be dealt with on the scale of a global institutional order, but
should be addressed on a bilateral level. Moreover, recent empirical research supports Rawls’s thesis that
by far the most important determinant of economic prosperity of countries is the quality of local
institutions, such as the rule of law, stable property rights, etc. Since good institutions are to a large
extend local products, local determinants might be more important then Pogge judges them.

At the same time, however, I do expect that World Poverty and Human Rights will affect readers of the LJIL as human beings, concerned with the fate of the worst-off in the world, and interested in ways to
improve their plight. In this sense, the book might be less naïve then it seems at first sight. As Rawls argued, a major task of political philosophy is to extend what are ordinarily thought of as the limits of
practical political possibility. Peter Singer’s Famine, Affluence and Morality is published more than 30
years ago, widely read and appreciated in academia. However, his argument that we fail to help the global
poor might have generated NGO’s like OXFAM, it did not generate any political change. If a plea, based
on positive duties does not affect people, it is a worthwhile attempt to formulate our responsibilities in
terms of negative duties. Moreover, the emerging dominance of globalization and global governance is a
good indication that the global institutional order does more and more become a subject of normative
importance. World Poverty and Human Rights is neither the first, nor final formulation of such a defense
of negative duties, but it surely marks a major step forward for a political-philosophical discussion of
global justice. As such it is not only an academic achievement. Pogge is quite right when he claims that
“whether or not we accept such a negative duty in regard to the justice of our global order makes a
momentous moral difference” (133).