This book represents a seminal work containing both an analytical and empirical inquiry into the phenomenon of poverty and human well-being. The book is centered on the phenomenon of destitution, "the extreme condition of ill-being," which the author views as both a personal calamity and cultural tragedy. Much like Adam Smith in An Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations, Dasgupta attempts to develop a broad political philosophy based on a multidisciplinary foundation for viewing human well-being which can serve as an ultimate guide for public policy. The work draws upon a mixture of economic theory, moral and political philosophy, anthropology, demography, epidemiology, nutrition, political science, ecology and environmental science. Because he attempts to make the work self-contained by including needed analytical tools the book is both long and considerably inconsistent in the level of exposition. It is, however, a thorough treatment of the poverty phenomenon in low income countries. Considerable attention is directed to resource allocation at all levels, as well as institutional factors, market failures and externalities associated with household decision making, particularly with regard to reproductive choices. Not surprisingly, it is a very long book, containing 540 pages of main text, covering a wide variety of topics. Consequently, it is virtually impossible to do little more in a review such as this than provide a description and overview of the work.

The book is divided into four parts and contains a total of 17 chapters, 7 chapter appendices and an extensive (80 page) list of references. Part I, "Well-Being: Theory and Realization," contains five chapters focusing on theory and the measurement of well-being. Topics covered here include "The Commodity Basis of Well-Being" (1), "Political Morality and the State" (2), "The Objects of Social Contracts" (3), "Well-Being: From Theory to Measurement" (4) and "The Realization of Well-Being" (5). This part focuses on the moral and philosophical issues which underlie the concept and measurement of poverty and destitution at both the individual and aggregate levels.
An Inquiry into Well Being and Destitution. Book 1993