

Ben Sachs

*State of Nature Thought Experiments and the Distinctness of Morality and Political Philosophy*

For anything that it might be thought the state ought to be doing, there is the matter of *for whom, to whom, or among whom* it ought to be doing that thing. In other words, if the state has moral obligations, it has those obligations to some individuals and not others. I argue that there is no way to determine whom those individuals are other than by thinking about how the state could have arisen out of a state of nature. There is no set of individuals who, due to their intrinsic nature, are the sole proper objects of the state's moral obligations. What makes someone an object of the state's obligations is that that individual engages in the kind of activity out of which the state might have arisen. State of nature thought experiments are our way of determining what kind of activity that is.

I argue, further, that when it comes to determining the objects of individuals' obligations there is no need to engage in this kind of thought experiment. So my initial thesis supports a radical additional thesis about the separateness of morality and political philosophy. Facts about political philosophy are only derivatively true; they're true in virtue of following from some more fundamental truth about how the state could have arisen out of a state of nature. Most of the interesting facts about morality, by contrast, are non-derivatively true.

Ben Sachs is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of St. Andrews. His interests are applied ethics, political philosophy, social philosophy, normative ethics and metaethics. He is currently writing a book which holds that we should see moral discourse as an explanatory project, and that approaching it this way would actually cause us to reach different conclusions about right and wrong than we might otherwise reach. Ben received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin in 2006.