The entanglement of state and non-state activity is a distinctive feature of global governance that is often underestimated. Traditional international relations theory dismissed the importance of non-state actors and treated states as not only the most important actors but also as relatively bounded and autonomous institutions, whether these boundaries were conceptualized as territorial borders or the edges of the state bureaucracy. While state-centric theories exhibiting some of these features of traditional international relations theory continue to be prominent there is widespread recognition that this traditional approach is inadequate and that non-state actors play important roles in global governance. However, even among those who focus on these roles the complexity of the entanglement of these with states and other public sector institutions often is not adequately acknowledged or explored. This chapter seeks to show that foregrounding this changing entanglement is necessary if we are to understand global governance. The chapter starts by briefly considering approaches that do not address this entanglement adequately. It then turns to focus on this entanglement theoretically, with empirical illustrations of its main points.

Traditionally realist theories of international relations saw states as the only significant actors and as bounded and relatively impervious to non-state actors. The mid-twentieth century, when these theories...
became ascendant, seemed to support this idea. The sharp delineation and careful control of territorial borders were evident worldwide. Governments also actively sought to build their capacities to control their economies and to shape their societies. In domestic politics pluralist theories in which states had been seen as responding to societal influences were increasingly displaced by theories emphasizing the autonomy of states.¹

Even as state-centric theories were becoming ascendant the empirical signs of a growing penetration of state territorial and institutional boundaries were beginning to be recognized.² Today, as the chapters in this book show, traditional realist theories that treat states as the only significant actor are challenged by a great many approaches that recognize the widely varied and important roles played by non-state actors in global governance. Nevertheless, both theories that focus on the power of states and theories that focus on the power of non-state actors often continue to see these two categories of state and non-state actors as relatively distinct, bounded and autonomous.

For instance, one response to growing interdependence on the part of state-centric theories has been the development of principal–agent theories in which it is acknowledged that sometimes non-state actors can be significant.³ However, this significance is seen as arising because states (principals) rationally choose to delegate certain functions to these non-state actors (their agents). States do this because it is cost effective to do so, perhaps because there are economies of scale in having a non-state organization carry out certain activities on behalf of all states or because states will trust information that is produced by a relatively autonomous non-governmental organization more than information that is produced by other states. Monitoring of agents by principals is always costly so, in general, states will only choose to delegate when the benefits from delegation outweigh the costs. While there are a great many useful insights that can be obtained from the principal–agent approach it tends to treat the state as a rational unitary and autonomous actor that can choose to delegate or not. The non-state actors are treated as having almost the same type of independence as would a lawyer that an individual might hire.

A quite different response to growing interdependence has been to emphasize the independent initiatives of non-state actors through concepts such as global civil society⁴ or private authority.⁵ Considering the intense criticism that has been articulated by global civil society of states, on issues like human rights or the environment, it is not surprising