EARTH JURISPRUDENCE: PRIVATE PROPERTY AND EARTH COMMUNITY

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DEDICATED TO MY BEAUTIFUL SOULMATE SHANI AND DANCING DAUGHTER FREYA.

AND TO THE LIFE AND WORK OF WILLIAM ’THOMAS’ BERRY (1914-2009)
# Table of Contents

- **Abstract** v
- **Acknowledgements** vi
- **Declaration** vii
- **Detailed Table of Contents** ix
- **Chapter One – Introduction** 1
- **Chapter Two – Anthropocentrism and Private Property** 43
- **Chapter Three – Earth Community** 89
- **Chapter Four – A Theory of Earth Jurisprudence** 127
- **Chapter Five – Private Property Revisited** 171
- **Chapter Six – Conclusion** 220
- **Bibliography** 232
The central argument of this thesis is that the institution of private property reflects an anthropocentric worldview and is contributing to the current environmental crisis. Drawing on the description of law as a mirror of society, it considers how our idea of law and the institution of private property can adapt to reflect the recent scientific description of human beings as interconnected and mutually dependent on nature. It advocates a paradigm shift in law from anthropocentrism to the concept of Earth community.

The thesis first provides an example laws anthropocentrism by exploring the legal-philosophical concept of private property. Private property is advanced over other legal concepts, because it plays a key role in governing human interactions with the environment and because it contains some of law’s main messages about nature and our place within it. The thesis analyses three main influences on the development of private property from the humanism of antiquity, the scientific revolution and the influence of liberal political philosophy. It concludes that the dominant rights-based theory of private property is anthropocentric and facilitates environmental harm.

The second component of the thesis explores contemporary scientific evidence supporting the ecocentric concept of Earth community. This concept argues that human beings are deeply connected and dependent on nature. It also describes the Earth as a community of subjects and not a collection of objects. Assuming that the social sphere is an important source for law, this thesis considers how a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism can influence the development of legal concepts. To catalyse this shift, it considers the ‘new story’ proposed by cultural historian and theologian Thomas Berry. This story describes contemporary scientific insights such as interconnectedness in a narrative form.

Third, the thesis uses the alternative paradigm of Earth community to articulate an emerging legal philosophy called Earth Jurisprudence. It describes Earth Jurisprudence as a theory of natural law and advocates for the recognition of two kinds of law, organised in a hierarchical relationship. At the apex is the Great Law, which represents the principle of Earth community. Beneath the Great Law is Human Law, which represents rules articulated by human authorities, which are consistent with the Great Law and enacted for the common good of the comprehensive Earth Community. In regard to the interrelationship between these two legal categories, two points are crucial. Human Law derives its legal quality from the Great Law and any law in contravention of this standard is considered a corruption of law and not morally binding on a population.

Finally, the thesis constructs an alternative concept of private property based on the philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence. It describes private property as a relationship between members of the Earth community, through tangible or intangible items. To be consistent with the philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence, the concept of private property must recognise human social relationships, include nonreciprocal duties and obligations; and respond to the ‘thing’ which is the subject matter of a property relationship. A theory of private property that overlooks any of these considerations is defective and deserves to be labelled such.
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DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

Some of the arguments in this thesis have been developed through publication during the course of research and writing. Parts of chapter two were first published in:


The concept of Earth Community and Thomas Berry’s thoughts on shifting culture in Chapter Three was first published in:

‘The Ecozoic Era’ in Peter Burdon (ed), An Invitation to Wild Law (Wakefield Press, 2011)

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‘The Jurisprudence of Thomas Berry’ (2011) 11 Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology 4

The evolution of private property discussed in Chapter Five was also published in:

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‘Rights of Nature: Developments’ (Flinders University, Staff Seminar, Adelaide 6 October 2010)

‘Wild Law in Australia and Environmental Jurisprudence’ (University of Wollongong, Wild Law and Legal Epistemologies, Wollongong, 26 July 2010)

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‘Wild Law and the Authority of Law’ (Flinders University, Students of Sustainability, Adelaide, 5 July 2010)


‘What is Good Land Use? From Rights to Obligations’ (Paper presented at From Plains to Plate, the Future of Food in South Australia, Adelaide, 12 February 2010)

‘Thomas Berry and a New Jurisprudence’ (Paper presented at Parliament of World Religions, Melbourne, 7 December 2009)


‘Native Title and the Clash of Civilisations’ (Paper Presented at Law Without Borders, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2 May 2008)

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Signed

Date
### Detailed Table of Contents

**CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION**  
I. THE THESIS  
II. THE INQUIRY  
1. The Environmental Crisis  
2. Environmental Crisis and Ethics  
3. The Relationship Between Law and Culture  
4. Law and Anthropocentrism  
5. Paradigm and Paradigm Shift  

**III. LITERATURE REVIEW**  
1. Earth Jurisprudence  
2. Environmental Philosophy  
3. Property Theory  
4. Legal Theory  

**IV. STRUCTURE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**  
1. Chapter Two: Anthropocentrism and the Law  
2. Chapter Three: Earth Community  
3. Chapter Four: Earth Jurisprudence  
4. Chapter Five: Private Property: Revisited  

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**CHAPTER TWO – ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND PRIVATE PROPERTY**  
I. INTRODUCTION  
II. DOMINION  
1. Philosophical Justification for Dominion  
2. From Dominion to Dominium  

**III. THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION: SEPARATION AND FRAGMENTATION**  
1. The Scientific Revolution  
2. Private Property and the Industrial Revolution  
3. The Separation of People from Place  
   A. Positive Law and Jeremy Bentham  
   B. Hohfeld’s Analysis  

**IV. THE LIBERAL THEORY OF PRIVATE PROPERTY**  

**V. CONCLUSION**

---

**CHAPTER THREE – EARTH COMMUNITY**  
I. INTRODUCTION  
II. PARADIGM SHIFT: EARTH COMMUNITY  
1. Quantum Physics  
2. Ecology  
3. Autopoiesis and Gaia Theory  

**III. CULTURAL AND LEGAL CHANGE**  
1. The New Story  

**IV. CONCLUSION**
CHAPTER FOUR – A THEORY OF EARTH JURISPRUDENCE

I. INTRODUCTION

II. WHAT IS EARTH JURISPRUDENCE?

III. THE LEGAL CATEGORIES OF EARTH JURISPRUDENCE

1. Natural Law and the Great Law
   A. Aquinas and Natural Law
   B. The Great Law

2. Human Law

IV. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE GREAT LAW AND HUMAN LAW

1. Legal Quality

2. Corruption and Civil Disobedience

V. CONCLUSION

CHAPTER FIVE – PRIVATE PROPERTY REVISITED

I. INTRODUCTION

II. THE INDETERMINACY OF PRIVATE PROPERTY

III. PRIVATE PROPERTY AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

IV. PRIVATE PROPERTY AND ETHICS

1. Obligation and Responsibility

2. Ethics and Earth Community

3. Responsibility in Practice

V. PROPERTY AND THINGS

1. Things in Theory

2. Things in Practice

VI. CONCLUSION

CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION

I. SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

II. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS AND CHAPTERS IN BOOKS

JOURNAL ARTICLES

OTHER SOURCES (MEDIA AND INTERNET)

CASE LAW

LEGISLATION
Declaration from ‘Wild Law’ – Australia’s First Conference on Earth Jurisprudence

We the participants of Wild Law, declare that the perceived separation between nature and human beings is a fundamental cause of the current environmental crisis. Our law reflects this in treating nature as property and by restricting rights to human subjects.

We assert that law needs to transition from an exclusive focus on human beings and recognise that we exist as part of a broader earth community. We recognise that the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not objects to be used. Each component member of the universe is thus capable of having rights.

We commit to evolving law so that it protects the natural world from destruction and cultivating Wild Laws that are consistent with the philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence.¹


xi