

LEGAL THEORY / JURISPRUDENCE SUMMARY



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INTRODUCTION

Legal Theory, or Jurisprudence, is the study of philosophies of law. It also encompasses the examination of legal systems from a theoretical and philosophical perspective. Legal theorists recognise that the law of a nation state does not just exist, nor that its development happened, independent of intellectual traditions. Legal theory and jurisprudential enquiry considers the broader implications of legal systems and the practice of law. In many respects legal theory is the glue, which binds all areas of law and legal practice.

This summary outlines the major aspects and approaches to thinking about the law, legal systems and western legal philosophies. It is written to give a basic outline and understanding of major tenets and developments within legal thought and provides an introduction to fundamental principles which underpin Australia's and other nation's legal systems.

This summary is structured in a way to introduce major aspects of legal thought. It is by no means definitive in its coverage of legal theory traditions. This summary is intended to be supplemented with wider reading in order to understand the finer nuances of theorists' arguments and to develop individual critical thought. This summary is merely a starting point in which to revise major aspects of legal thought and to introduce students to the idea of critically analysing the state of the law at present.

This summary covers the major traditions of legal thought including positivism, natural law theory, as well as legal obligations, law and morality, civil disobedience, and unjust laws. It also covers legal philosophy such as rights based legal discourse, the rule of law, law and democracy and post-structural legal theory. The summary concludes with a brief consideration of critical legal theory and the interaction of law and gender, or feminist legal theory.

Two broad groups of 'legal theory' (According to Roger Cotterrell)

- Analytical or normative theory: is based on the philosophical concepts. The aim is to explain the character of law solely in terms of the conceptual structure of legal doctrine, and the relationships between rules, principles, concepts and values within the doctrine.
- Empirical legal theory: is the theory that seeks to explain the character of law in terms of historical and social conditions. It treats the doctrinal and institutional characteristics of law emphasised in normative legal theory as explicable in terms of their social origins and effects.

TOPIC 1: POSITIVISM AND THE NATURE OF LAW(S)

What is a legal system?

There are **three main perspectives** taken by '**positivists**' on what the law is and what constitutes a legal system:

- (i) A system of obligations for citizens and state;
- (ii) A system of rules that regulate citizen conduct;
- (iii) A system of obligations regulating morality.



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