



University of Antwerp
Personal Rights and
Property Rights

Call for Papers – International Conference
The Legal Distinction between Persons and Things: Changing Perspectives
7-8 July 2025, University of Antwerp (Belgium)

Overview

Since ancient times, private law has maintained a fundamental dichotomy between persons and things. Persons are the holders of rights and duties, actively participating in legal transactions. In contrast, things serve merely as objects of rights and duties, lacking any participation in legal relations. This traditional view posits that within modern private law, only human beings or various forms of corporations qualify as ‘persons’, while all other entities, including living beings such as animals, are ‘things’ that can be owned. However, recent legal, societal and scientific advancements challenge this rigid dichotomy, prompting a critical re-evaluation of the legal status of various entities in the Anthropocene.

This Conference aims to explore the evolving perspectives on the legal distinction between persons and things through three primary objectives.

1. First, we seek to **identify and evaluate the changing views on the legal status of persons and things**. This includes examining the evolving status and dereification of animals in law; considering the legal implications of AI and robots’ agency and cognitive abilities for legal accountability or subjective rights; analysing the legal status of embryos, brain organoids and the deceased; evaluating the relevance of strong personal interests in cultural heritage, souvenirs, or social media accounts; the trend towards ascribing personhood or rights to nature; and exploring the commodification and legal status of the human body and body material.
2. Second, the aim is to **outline the implications these changing views have for private law** at the international, European, and national levels. This involves examining how the blurring of the person-thing dichotomy affects the traditional understanding of autonomy, liability and damage recovery, challenging the ‘anthropocentrism’ of law. Moreover, it involves rethinking central concepts of private law relating to kinship and family, and reconceptualizing personality rights. This also includes assessing the implications of commodifying the human body and its parts, or the privacy-implications of innovative neuro-technologies.
3. Third, we intend to explore **alternative views on the way in which the distinction between persons and things could be given shape**. This involves exploring the concept of (partial) personhood for animals and nature, assessing whether a new kind of status is necessary and/or desirable. It also includes the question how such entities may be legally represented, and by whom. Potentially, such exploration could result in abandoning the person-thing dichotomy in favour of more dynamic and relational legal ontologies, taking into account the role of ‘contractualization’ and the perspective of assemblage theory.

Different methodologies, different approaches

For this Conference, we are open to contributions from a wide range of perspectives. Most importantly, the focus of the paper should connect to the central theme of changing perspectives on the distinction between persons and things, aligning with one of the three objectives outlined above. We explicitly encourage contributions that employ innovative legal methodologies to reassess the person-thing dichotomy, provide in-depth analyses of the legal, ethical and societal implications of new categories of entities, or offer comparative perspectives across different jurisdictions and legal traditions.

Submission guidelines

Researchers in all stages of their careers are invited to submit abstracts of around 500 words by 15 December 2024 to pr2@uantwerpen.be. It is also possible to submit 3 abstracts in the form of a panel with a common theme. If you do want to submit a panel, please clearly note that the submission is part of a panel presentation, and add a short (100 words) description of the panel.

Registration fee

The registration fee for the 2-day Conference is €180 per person, with a discounted fee of €120 for (PhD) students. This fee includes the full 2-day programme including coffee, tea, lunch and a reception. On Monday 7 July, there is an optional Conference Dinner in the City Hall. Those interested in joining the Dinner can buy a ticket during registration.

Important dates

- Abstract submission deadline: 15 December 2024.
- Conference dates: 7-8 July 2025 .

More information

- The Conference language is English.
- Presentations in the parallel sessions will last 20 minutes with 10 minutes discussion.
- A selection of papers will be eligible for publication in an edited volume. More information will follow at a later stage.

Contact Information

For further inquiries, please contact Dr. Eva Bernet Kempers at pr2@uantwerpen.be or visit our Conference Website at www.uantwerpen.be/changing-perspectives.

We look forward to your contributions to this critical and timely discussion on the evolving legal perspectives on persons and things.