The Domestic Relations Exception to Federal Jurisdiction: Rethinking an Unsettled Federal Courts Doctrine

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THE DOMESTIC RELATIONS
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DOCTRINE†

MICHAEL ASHLEY STEIN*

INTRODUCTION

In 1859, Supreme Court dicta disclaimed federal court jurisdiction
over “the subject of divorce, or . . . alimony.”¹ This pronouncement,
unsupported by either precedent or authority, became the cornerstone
of an “exception” to federal jurisdiction over “domestic relations”—i.e.,
“family law”—cases. Domestic relations actions span a wide spectrum
of subjects that arise under both diversity and federal question juris­
diction and can be divided into four categories:² (1) “core” cases, which
make declarations of status such as marriage, divorce, alimony, custody,
and their attendant obligations;³ (2) “core enforcement” cases that
seek to enforce obligations granted in core cases;⁴ (3) “domestic tort”
cases, which claim injuries to rights awarded in core cases;⁵ and (4)

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expressed herein, as well as any errors, are my own.
² The categories used in this Article modify those annunciated by Justice Blackmun. See
³ With one notable exception, core cases have consistently been excluded from federal
jurisdiction. See infra notes 48–49.
⁴ See, e.g., Drewes v. Ilnicki, 863 F.2d 469, 471 (6th Cir. 1988) (action to enforce support
arrearages); Jagiella v. Jagiella, 647 F.2d 561, 562 (5th Cir. 1981) (suit for overdue child support
payments); Solomon v. Solomon, 516 F.2d 1018 (3d Cir. 1975) (claim based on separation
agreement); Hernstadt v. Hernstadt, 373 F.2d 316 (2d Cir. 1967) (alleging violation of custody
and visitation agreement).
⁵ See, e.g., Ingram v. Hayes, 866 F.2d 368 (11th Cir. 1988) (action for intentional infliction
of emotional distress); Lloyd v. Lockler, 694 F.2d 489 (7th Cir. 1982) (claim of interference with
the custody of a child); Bennett v. Bennett, 682 F.2d 1099 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (suit for past violations
of an established custody order); Sutter v. Pitts, 699 F.2d 842 (1st Cir. 1981) (asserting claim for
malicious frustration of exercise of civil rights). This category intentionally excludes contract
“domestic federal question” cases that claim constitutional or other federal violations of core case rights. Core, core enforcement, and domestic tort cases are usually brought pursuant to the diversity statute while domestic federal question cases invoke federal question jurisdiction.

The “domestic relations exception” to federal court jurisdiction has not been uniformly embraced. Over the years, both federal courts and commentators have debated the validity and scope of a domestic relations exception to either diversity or federal question jurisdiction. The disagreement among federal judges has occasioned inter-circuit conflicts over federal court adjudication of core enforcement, domestic tort, and domestic federal question actions, as well as intra-circuit conflicts over domestic federal question actions. Commentators, in turn, disagree not only about the merits of continuing to recognize such an exception, but also as to whether the exception is a jurisdictional or a jurisprudential bar to hearing cases.

Underlying these disagreements is a complex and unresolved debate over the proper role of federal courts in adjudicating a substantive area of law traditionally considered within the exclusive purview of state courts. At issue are the competing federal courts notions of mandatory jurisdiction and discretion, differing ideas of federalism and comity, and the controversy over whether parity exists between federal and state tribunals. Although I do not in this Article attempt final resolution of these issues, I propose that the question of where cases, because most assertions of breach of contract may be characterized as core enforcement actions.

An area of contract law that does not fall within the core enforcement category and has yet to be raised in federal court as a domestic relations case is the area of claims arising from surrogate motherhood contract agreements. As more and more states outlaw such arrangements, prospective parents may reach out to surrogates in other jurisdictions, creating diversity of citizenship and causing constitutional as well as conflict-of-law problems. See generally Martha A. Field, Surrogate Motherhood (1988).

A federal question claim that has not yet arisen but which will probably be asserted in the near future is the issue of ownership and fair use of intellectual property that had been part of a marital estate. See 28 U.S.C. §1338(a) (1988) (providing exclusive federal jurisdiction over patent, trademark, and copyright cases).


As Professor Robert Cover notes, “[t]he jurisdictional complexities of the American system
domestic relations belongs in our dual system acts as a baseline for considering these different notions. In addition, resolution of these issues is of practical significance to our judicial system in a variety of other contexts, because their examination can help better define the boundaries between federal and state courts.

The Supreme Court has not issued clear guidance that would help resolve this debate. In 1992, in *Ankenbrandt v. Richards*, the Supreme Court addressed the subject of a domestic relations exception for the first time in more than sixty years. The Court both reaffirmed and narrowed an exception of certain core cases from federal jurisdiction, but declined either to explicate the jurisdictional boundaries of core enforcement and domestic tort actions or to explain the mechanics of abstaining from either type of action. The Court also failed to address whether domestic federal question claims are exempt from district court review. As a result the lower federal courts have been left without clear guidance on how to resolve their inconsistent and often conflicting approaches to the domestic relations exception—if indeed such an exception is to be recognized and applied at all.

This Article examines the circuitous development of the domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction from *Barber v. Barber* to the contemporary decision of *Ankenbrandt v. Richards*. It asserts that, following *Ankenbrandt*, federal court jurisdiction exists over all non-core actions properly arising under either the diversity or federal question jurisdiction statutes. The Article then addresses the issue of whether the existence of jurisdiction compels federal court adjudication of all domestic related disputes within their purview or, instead, permits abstention from those cases. The Article asserts the propriety of abstention principles and proposes a new form of abstention whose application would exclude from federal review all core cases as well as suits raising difficult issues of unresolved state law. It then evaluates the competing policy concerns informing a federal court's decision whether to exert jurisdiction over non-core actions, concluding that
prudential considerations support the jurisdictional lines drawn in the proposed "Ankenbrandt abstention" doctrine.

Part I sets forth the history of the domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction, from its origin in *Barber v. Barber*¹³ to the Supreme Court's most recent treatment of the exception in *Ankenbrandt v. Richards*.¹⁴ Part II addresses the question of whether federal courts must assert their jurisdiction over non-core cases. It begins by reviewing the debate between those scholars who advocate mandatory jurisdiction and those who support judicially created exceptions, especially abstention. It concludes that equitable restraint of federal courts is a valid limitation on federal jurisdiction provided the limitation is principled and well delineated. Part II then reviews existing abstention doctrines and considers their applicability to non-core domestic relations matters. It asserts that the proper type of abstention doctrine to apply in the domestic relations context is a corollary of existing abstention doctrine. Part II concludes by proposing and explicating the parameters of a new abstention doctrine—"Ankenbrandt abstention." Under Ankenbrandt abstention, federal courts would abstain from hearing cases over which they otherwise have jurisdiction if those cases were either core cases or raised difficult issues of unresolved state law. District courts could also retain jurisdiction over a suit to ensure later resolution of non-domestic issues.

Because abstention under Ankenbrandt, as under any other abstention doctrine, would be discretionary, Part III examines the policy reasons traditionally offered by federal courts for declining to hear domestic relations cases. These reasons include special state interest and expertise, an unstated distaste for what are perceived as local family matters, and federal docket congestion. Part III demonstrates that countervailing policy concerns favoring federal court jurisdiction outweigh each of these traditionally utilized policies. These countervailing concerns include recognition of the national character of many family law doctrines, traditional diversity concerns of preventing prejudice against non-local parties, a general institutional duty of federal courts to exercise their jurisdiction, and the protection of federal rights. Interwoven with this analysis are notions of federalism, comity and parity.

¹⁴ 112 S. Ct. 2206.
I. THE HISTORY OF THE DOMESTIC RELATIONS EXCEPTION TO FEDERAL JURISDICTION

In 1858, Huldah Adeline Barber, through her "next friend," applied to the New York Court of Chancery for divorce from her husband, Hiram Barber. Shortly after the grant of the decree, which also awarded Huldah alimony, Hiram fled to Wisconsin in order to avoid New York state court jurisdiction. He then sued his former wife for divorce in a Wisconsin state court, omitting from his complaint any reference to the New York decree and asserting instead that his wife had "wilfully abandoned him."

In response, Huldah sued Hiram in Wisconsin federal district court for enforcement of the New York State divorce decree. Hiram moved for dismissal of the suit, alleging that the district court lacked jurisdiction to hear the matter on two grounds. First, he asserted that the federal court could not adjudicate the dispute because diversity of citizenship could never exist between previously married individuals, the wife's citizenship necessarily remaining that of her husband.

Like other married women of her era, Mrs. Barber was represented through a "next friend" because she was not legally able to bring suit on her own behalf. See 1 Roger Foster, Federal Practice in Civil Cases 91-92 (Boston, Boston Book Co. 1892) ("[T]he rule was early laid down as follows: 'Where the wife complains of the husband and asks relief against him she must use the name of some other person in prosecuting the suit...'}} (quoting Bein v. Heath, 47 U.S. (6 How.) 228, 240 (1848))). This practice was adopted from English common law, under which a woman could not maintain a suit in her own name unless her husband was either exiled or had "abjured the realm." See 1 William Blackstone, Commentaries *443.

In issuing the decree, the court of chancery found that Hiram was "guilty of cruel and inhuman treatment of his wife" whom "he had abandoned, neglected and refused to provide for." Barber, 62 U.S. at 585. The divorce granted was therefore a mensa et thoro, or "from bed and board... by which the parties are separated and forbidden to live or cohabit together, without affecting the marriage itself," in contrast to divorce a vinculo matrimonii, or "from the bond of marriage." See Black's Law Dictionary 480 (6th ed. 1990). Divorces a mensa et thoro were granted in England, usually by ecclesiastical courts, for abandonment and for acts of cruelty. The grant of a divorce a vinculo matrimonii was only by act of Parliament and presupposed the marriage void ab initio. See 1 William Blackstone, Commentaries *440-41; see also Homer H. Clark, Jr., Law of Domestic Relations § 11.1, at 281 (1968).

See Barber, 62 U.S. at 588. Based on Huldah's allegedly absconding, Hiram had requested a divorce a vinculo matrimonii.

ond, he argued that the district court lacked jurisdiction because the subject of alimony was strictly within the purview of English ecclesiastical courts at the time of the adoption of the Constitution. Because he viewed federal court jurisdiction as extending only to matters that had been within the scope of English law and equity powers, that jurisdiction did not extend to alimony. The district court rejected Hiram's assertions and exercised jurisdiction. On appeal to the Supreme Court, Hiram continued to aver that the district court lacked both diversity and subject matter jurisdiction.

Rejecting both of Hiram's jurisdictional arguments, the Supreme Court affirmed the New York state divorce and alimony decree and directed the Wisconsin federal territorial court to issue a mandate.

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20 See Barber, 62 U.S. at 592.

21 See id. The assertion that federal court jurisdiction was coterminous with English practice at the time of the Constitution's adoption was a common basis for denying jurisdiction. For example, in the years prior to the Barber decision in the nineteenth century, the Court often interpreted the scope of federal court jurisdiction under the Judiciary Act by referring to English judicial authority. See, e.g., Story v. Livingston, 38 U.S. (13 Pet.) 359, 368–69 (1839) (striking down rule made by the District Court of Louisiana, abolishing chancery practice); Robinson v. Campbell, 16 U.S. (1 Wheat.) 212, 221–23 (1818) (rights to hold legal title to land followed those under English law). This was also the explanation given to justify the exception from federal jurisdiction of probate matters. See, e.g., Fontain v. Ravenel, 58 U.S. (17 How.) 369, 384–85 (1854) (patens patria power to allocate a charitable trust same as that established in Elizabethan England).

22 Because the appeal came from a district court located in what is referred to in the case as a "territory," there is the danger of erroneously viewing Barber as the same type of "territorial" case discussed infra text accompanying notes 35–43. See Resnik, supra note 10, at 1738 n.293 (making the above admonition). In fact, Wisconsin was admitted to the Union 10 years prior to the Barber decision. See An Act for the Admission of the State of Wisconsin into the Union, ch. 50, § 1, 9 Stat. 293, 293 (1848). By an earlier act, Congress had established a federal district court...
consistent with the New York holding. The Court began its opinion with the famous pronouncement, unsupported by either precedent or authority, that would become the "fountainhead" of the domestic relations exception: "We disclaim altogether any jurisdiction in the courts of the United States upon the subject of divorce, or for the allowance of alimony, either as an original proceeding in chancery or as an incident to divorce . . . ." Having thus eschewed any jurisdiction over the grant of either divorce or alimony, the Court explicitly rejected Hiram's arguments, reasoning that, although a suit for the allowance of divorce or alimony exceeded the boundaries of English and, therefore, its own jurisdiction, a suit to enforce a divorce or alimony decree lay fully within both English and federal court equity jurisdiction. The Court also rejected Hiram's argument that marriage in Wisconsin empowered to hear "suits of a civil nature at common law or in equity." See Act of Aug. 6, 1846, ch. 89, § 4, 9 Stat. 56, 57.

23 See Barber, 62 U.S. at 599-600.


25 Michael L. Corrado, Comment, Enforcing State Domestic Relations Decrees in Federal Courts, 50 U. CHI. L. REV. 1397, 1360 (1983); see also Barbara Ann Anwood, Domestic Relations Cases in Federal Court: Toward a Principled Exercise of Jurisdiction, 35 HASTINGS L.J. 571, 575-74 (1984) ("The reluctance to entertain domestic relations cases originated in nineteenth century Supreme Court dicta concerning the scope of the federal court's law and equity jurisdiction."); Sharon Elizabeth Rush, Domestic Relations Law: Federal Jurisdiction and State Sovereignty in Perspective, 60 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 1, 1 (1984) ("Although the Court announced the disclaimer only in dicta, and no authoritative analysis of its validity exists, federal courts have adamantly declared that the domestic relations exception divests them of jurisdiction over divorce, alimony, and child custody."); Bonnie Moore, Comment, Federal Jurisdiction and the Domestic Relations Exception: A Search for Parameters, 51 UCLA L. REV. 845, 848 (1984) ("This dictum has since been cited as authority for the domestic relations exceptions in most of the cases dealing with the exception."); Ouellette, supra note 24, at 668 n.62 ("That the Supreme Court's dicta is unsupported by authority is, in fact, a primary focus of the doctrine's critics."); Poker, supra note 24, at 146 ("The Supreme Court, through its dicta in Barber . . . . laid the foundation for the domestic relations exception.").

26 Barber, 62 U.S. at 584.

27 See id. at 589.
precluded diversity of citizenship between the parties. Instead, the Court held that Huldah's divorce decree entitled her to her own domicile. It also recognized women's individual domiciles when acting as plaintiffs in their own divorce suits. Accordingly, Huldah Barber had satisfied the jurisdictional requirements to bring suit.

Three Justices dissented, taking issue with the majority for affirming the district court's jurisdiction. The dissenters asserted first that a married woman could never have a domicile separate from her husband, because legally they were considered one person. They next asserted that federal courts totally lacked jurisdiction over domestic relations matters, because English law empowered the ecclesiastic courts, not the courts of equity, to adjudicate all such cases. Finally, the dissenters ruminated that domestic relations matters as a whole were special enclaves of state governance.

The use of the Barber dicta as precedent for a domestic relations exception was bolstered thirty years later in In re Burrus. The Court's ruling has been characterized as a "stunning victory for the relatively small number of wives who could first obtain recognition of their separate legal status." Resnik, supra note 10, at 1741; see also Rogers Smith, "One United People": Second Class Female Citizenship and the American Quest for Community, 1 YALE J.L. & HUMAN. 229, 254 (1989) (Barber "remains the closest the Supreme Court came to enunciating a liberal egalitarian view of the status of women during the antebellum years.").

The only other hurdle to obtaining jurisdiction was satisfying the jurisdictional amount. At the time of Barber, the minimum amount in controversy requirement was the original $500 fixed by the Judiciary Act of 1789. See Act of Sept. 24, 1789, ch. 20, § 11, 1 Stat. 73, 78. The amount has since been steadily increased. See Act of Mar. 3, 1887, ch. 375, § 1, 24 Stat. 592, 592 (to $2,000 in 1887); Act of Mar. 3, 1911, ch. 231, § 24, 36 Stat. 1087, 1091 (to $3,000 in 1911); Act of July 25, 1958, Pub. L. No. 85-554, § 1, 72 Stat. 415, 415 (to $10,000 in 1958); Act of Nov. 19, 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-702, § 201, 102 Stat. 4640, 4640 (codified at 28 U.S.C. § 1332 (1988)) (to $50,000 in 1988). The use of the minimum amount in controversy requirement as a bar to jurisdiction over domestic relations cases is discussed infra note 279 and accompanying text.

The rhetoric employed by the dissent offers insight into the nineteenth-century political mindset that inspired the domestic relations exception and is worth quoting at length:

'It is not in accordance with the design and operation of a Government having its origin in causes and necessities, political, general, and external, that it should assume to regulate the domestic relations of society; should, with a kind of inquisitorial authority, enter the habitations and even into the chambers and nurseries of private families, and inquire into and pronounce upon the morals and habits and affectations or antipathies of the members of every household. . . . The Federal tribunals can have no power to control the duties or the habits of the different members of private families in their domestic intercourse.'

Id. at 605. In so arguing, the dissent did not specifically mention the Judiciary Act of 1789 or any other legislative provision.

The rhetoric employed by the dissent offers insight into the nineteenth-century political mindset that inspired the domestic relations exception and is worth quoting at length:

Id. at 602.

30 Id. at 589, 591. The Court's ruling has been characterized as a "stunning victory for the relatively small number of wives who could first obtain recognition of their separate legal status." Resnik, supra note 10, at 1741; see also Rogers Smith, "One United People": Second Class Female Citizenship and the American Quest for Community, 1 YALE J.L. & HUMAN. 229, 254 (1989) (Barber "remains the closest the Supreme Court came to enunciating a liberal egalitarian view of the status of women during the antebellum years.").

32 See Barber, 62 U.S. at 600-02 ("[H]ow can it be conceived that pending the existence of this relation the unity it creates can be reconciled with separate and independent capacities in that unity, such as belong to beings wholly disconnected?").
a father brought an action for a writ of habeas corpus seeking to regain custody of his daughter after she had been unlawfully detained by her grandparents. Citing *Barber*, the Supreme Court denied jurisdiction on the grounds that "[t]he whole subject of the domestic relations of husband and wife, parent and child, belongs to the laws of the States and not to the laws of the United States." The Court did not, however, make any mention of a principled basis for this lack of subject matter jurisdiction.

Adding to the confusion in this area, two succeeding Supreme Court decisions held that federal courts had jurisdiction to hear appeals of core cases when they originated in federal territorial courts. In *Simms v. Simms*, the Court held that, although it may "be assumed as indubitable" that the federal courts have no jurisdiction over core cases, the Court did have jurisdiction to review divorce decrees appealed from the Supreme Court of the Arizona Territory. The Court justified its exercise of jurisdiction on the grounds that the divorce had been granted in a territorial (albeit federal) court, rather than an Article III court. As observed, however, by Professor Elizabeth Rush, "the *Simms* Court did not address the [odd] fact that the Supreme Court was itself an article III court, even when reviewing a territorial court's alimony award."

Seven years later, in *De La Rama v. De La Rama*, an appeal of an alimony decree from the Supreme Court of the Philippine Islands, the Court, citing *Barber*, explained the historical reasons why diversity jurisdiction did not extend to core actions. Conspicuously absent from the rationales offered were the "common law or equity" distinctions made by the *Barber* dissent. This absence is particularly difficult to understand given that the appellate jurisdictional statute at issue,

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34 Id. at 593-94.
35 Congressional legislation provided for Supreme Court review of cases appealed from the Supreme Courts of the territories and the Philippine Islands as long as they met a minimum jurisdictional amount-in-controversy requirement. See Act of Sept. 9, 1850, ch. 51, § 9, 9 Stat. 453, 455-56 (Utah); Act of Mar. 2, 1861, ch. 86, § 9, 12 Stat. 239, 241-42 (Dakota); Act of Feb. 24, 1863, ch. 56, § 2, 12 Stat. 664, 665 (Arizona); Act of July 1, 1902, ch. 1369, § 10, 32 Stat. 691, 695 (Philippine Islands).
36 175 U.S. 162 (1899).
37 Id. at 167-68.
38 Id. at 168.
39 See Rush, supra note 25, at 4 n.16.
40 201 U.S. 303 (1906).
41 The *De La Rama* Court explained that the exception was supported "both by reasons of fact that the husband and wife cannot usually be citizens of different States, so long as the marriage relation continues, and for the further reason that a suit for divorce in itself involves no pecuniary value." Id. at 307. In addition, two cases from the District of Columbia Orphan's
extending to "all actions, cases, causes, and proceedings,"\textsuperscript{42} freely allowed the Court to distinguish this case from the "common law or equity" limitation of the diversity statute. The \textit{De La Rama} Court, distancing itself from \textit{Barber}, instead chose to reaffirm explicitly the curious and circumspect \textit{Simms} rationale.\textsuperscript{43}

A quarter century later, in \textit{Ohio ex rel. Popovici v. Alger},\textsuperscript{44} the Court held that a federal statute granting exclusive federal court jurisdiction over "all suits and proceedings against . . . consuls or vice-consuls"\textsuperscript{45} did not preclude state adjudication of divorce decrees involving such officials. \textit{Popovici} involved an appeal by a Romanian vice-consul from a state divorce decree based upon the state court's apparent lack of authority to adjudicate the matter. In disclaiming exclusive federal jurisdiction, Justice Holmes did not cite the diversity statute. Instead, he traced the absence of jurisdiction directly to the Constitution: if the Framers contemplated that states would preside exclusively over domestic relations matters, then construing the Constitution accordingly is easy; construing the statute accordingly is not much harder.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, Justice Holmes reasoned, the phrase "suits and proceedings against . . . consuls and vice-consuls" necessarily referred to "ordinary civil proceedings" and not to domestic matters, which formally would have been the province of ecclesiastical courts.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{42}§ 10, 32 Stat. at 695.
\textsuperscript{43}See \textit{De La Rama}, 201 U.S. at 308; \textit{Simms v. Simms}, 175 U.S. 162, 167 (1899).
\textsuperscript{44}280 U.S. 379 (1930).
\textsuperscript{45}See Federal Judicial Code, Act of Mar. 3, 1911, ch. 231, §§ 24, 233, 256, 36 Stat. 1087, 1091-94, 1156, 1160-61. The Judicial Code interpreted Article II, § 2, cl. 1 of the Constitution, providing in pertinent part that "[t]he judicial Power shall extend . . . to all Cases affecting Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls . . . ." U.S. Const. art. II, § 2. The Judicial Code sections have been revised and codified as follows:

The district courts shall have original jurisdiction, exclusive of the courts of the States, of all civil actions and proceedings against—
(1) consuls or vice consuls of foreign states; or
(2) members of a mission or members of their families . . .

\textsuperscript{46}\textit{Ohio ex rel. Popovici}, 280 U.S. at 383.
\textsuperscript{47}Id. at 384.
Given the inconsistencies of the Supreme Court's approach in this area, it is not surprising that, throughout the history of federal court adjudication of domestic relations cases, judges and scholars have debated the existence and scope of an exception to federal court jurisdiction. With one notable exception, district courts agree that their jurisdiction does not extend to core suits. Beyond this initial agreement, however, the approach taken by federal courts to non-core actions may be most charitably described as chaotic.

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48 See Spindel v. Spindel, 283 F. Supp. 797 (E.D.N.Y. 1968) (federal courts authorized to determine validity of foreign divorce decrees). Although Judge Jack B. Weinstein’s opinion was the first to hold explicitly that jurisdiction existed over a core case, a handful of cases have raised core issues only to dispose of them on other grounds. See, e.g., Southard v. Southard, 305 F.2d 730 (2d Cir. 1962) (issue already litigated); Harrison v. Harrison, 214 F.2d 571 (4th Cir.), cert. denied, 348 U.S. 896 (1954) (issue already litigated); Cohen v. Randall, 137 F.2d 441 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 320 U.S. 796 (1943) (failure to state a claim); McNeil v. McNeil, 78 F. 834 (C.C.N.D. Cal. 1897), aff’d, 170 F. 280 (9th Cir. 1909) (laches); see also Note, Domestic Relations, supra note 24, at 633 (optimistically yet erroneously interpreting Spindel as opening “the door for reexamination of the whole question of federal jurisdiction in divorce and domestic relations cases”).

49 "As a general rule, federal courts refuse to hear ‘suits for divorce and alimony, child custody actions, disputes over visitation rights, suits to establish paternity and to obtain child support, and actions to enforce separation or divorce decrees still subject to state court modification.’ Congleton v. Holy Cross Child Placement Agency, 919 F.2d 1077, 1078 (5th Cir. 1990) (citing Crouch v. Crouch, 566 F.2d 466, 467 (5th Cir. 1977) (citations omitted)); see also Vaughan v. Smithson, 883 F.2d 85, 84 (10th Cir. 1989) (“It is now well established that federal courts do not have diversity jurisdiction to grant a divorce or annulment, determine support payments, or award custody of a child.”); Wasserman v. Wasserman, 671 F.2d 832, 834 (4th Cir. 1982) (“The federal courts have long held that diversity jurisdiction does not include the power to grant divorces, determine alimony or support obligations, or determine child custody rights.”) Buechold v. Ortiz, 401 F.2d 371, 372 (9th Cir. 1968) (“Even though there is diversity of citizenship and a sufficient amount in controversy to satisfy the technical jurisdictional requirements, the federal courts have no jurisdiction of suits to establish paternity and child support.” (citing Albanese v. Richter, 161 F.2d 688 (3d Cir.), cert. denied, 332 U.S. 782 (1947))).

Federal courts also have declined to decide child custody disputes on the grounds that no amount in controversy could be established because the dispute cannot be “reduced to monetary value.” See John W. Dwyer, THE LAW AND PROCEDURE OF THE UNITED STATES COURTS 193 (1901) (“In such a case there is no pecuniary standard of value, as it rises superior to money considerations.”); see also Charles P. Williams, JURISDICTION AND PRACTICE OF FEDERAL COURTS: A HANDBOOK FOR PRACTITIONERS AND STUDENTS 100 (1917) (“The inestimable privilege of civil liberty, the value of the custody of the child, or of a severance of the marriage relation, are too imponderable to be weighed and calculated in the ordinary method of business transactions.”).

50 See, e.g., Moore, supra note 25, at 850 (“While the domestic relations exception has become well established, it has not become well defined.” (footnote omitted)); Ouilette, supra note 24, at 668 (“The domestic relations exception has grown into a well-established, but inconsistent and confusing doctrine . . . .”); Poker, supra note 24, at 142 (“The breadth of the exception . . . remains[s] unclear.”); Swenson, supra note 24, at 1100 (“A confused and inconsistent domestic relations exception doctrine has emerged . . . .”); Ullman, supra note 24, at 1824 (“While all courts have adhered to the domestic relations exception, the breadth of the exception, as well as justifications for it, remain unclear.” (footnotes omitted)).
conflicts exist over the propriety of hearing core enforcement, domestic tort, and domestic federal question cases. For example, while the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Eleventh Circuits have held that federal courts may exercise jurisdiction over core enforcement suits, the Second, Third and Seventh Circuits have reached the opposite conclusion. Federal courts have likewise diverged over the extent of an exception for domestic tort actions. For example, the District of Columbia, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Circuits will entertain these suits, whereas the First and Eleventh will not.

An inter-circuit conflict also exists over whether domestic federal question suits may properly be heard in federal fora. The Second,
Fourth, 66 Fifth 67 and Eleventh 68 Circuits have held that district courts may assume jurisdiction over constitutional actions even though they arise from a domestic context, contrary to the holdings of the Third 69 and Ninth 70 Circuits. Adding to this confusion, the First, 71 Sixth 72 and Eighth 73 Circuits have intra-circuit conflicts over the propriety of adjudicating federal question domestic cases.

With this tremendous conflict within and among the circuits as a backdrop, the Ankenbrandt Court revisited the domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction in 1992, 74 more than sixty years after its decision in Popovici. In 1989, Missouri citizen Carol Ankenbrandt sued her former husband and his female companion, who were Louisiana

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66 See, e.g., Kelser v. Anne Arundel County Dep't of Social Servs., 679 F.2d 1092 (4th Cir. 1982) (remanding a § 1983 claim to proceed on the merits).
67 See, e.g., Rowell v. Oesterle, 626 F.2d 437 (5th Cir. 1980) (allowing habeas corpus petition seeking "release" of petitioner's two children).
68 See, e.g., Ingram, 866 F.2d at 370 ("The district court properly exercised jurisdiction over this federal question despite its domestic relations genesis.").
70 See, e.g., Tree Top v. Smith, 577 F.2d 519 (9th Cir. 1978) (disallowing habeas petition).
71 Compare Femos-Lopez v. Figarella Lopez, 929 F.2d 20, 23 (1st Cir. 1991) (domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction did not apply to habeas petition challenging Puerto Rico's alimony statute) with Hemon v. Office of Pub. Guardian, 878 F.2d 13, 14 (1st Cir. 1989) ("It is settled law that federal habeas corpus jurisdiction does not extend to state court disputes over child custody") and Sylvander v. New England Home for Little Wanderers, 584 F.2d 1103, 1115 (1st Cir. 1978) (child custody rulings by themselves are not sufficient to trigger a federal habeas remedy on behalf of a dissatisfied mother).
72 Compare Agg v. Flanagan, 855 F.2d 336, 336-37 (6th Cir. 1988) (holding that district court had subject matter jurisdiction over § 1983 civil rights class action brought on behalf of all male litigants of particular state family court who would be subject to certain wage assignments, garnishments, or wage attachments) and Hooks v. Hooks, 771 F.2d 935, 935-36 (6th Cir. 1985) (former wife's complaint alleging that former husband and others conspired to wrongfully deprive her of physical custody of her children without due process stated a cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983) with Firestone v. Cleveland Trust Co., 654 F.2d 1212, 1215 (6th Cir. 1981) ("Even when brought under the guise of a federal question action, a suit whose substance is domestic relations generally will not be entertained in a federal court.") and Huynh Thi Anh v. Levy, 586 F.2d 625, 627 (6th Cir. 1978) (disallowing a habeas petition).
73 Compare Ruffalo ex rel. Ruffalo v. Civiletti, 702 F.2d 710, 711 (8th Cir. 1983) (domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction did not apply to mother's constitutional action against federal officials seeking return of minor son) and Overman v. United States, 563 F.2d 1287, 1292 (8th Cir. 1977) (stating that "[t]here is, and ought to be, a continuing federal policy to avoid handling domestic relations cases in federal court in the absence of important concerns of a constitutional dimension") with Bergstrom v. Bergstrom, 623 F.2d 517, 520 (8th Cir. 1980) ("Where a constitutional issue arises out of a custody dispute . . . the proper course is to dismiss the case and remand to the state court.").
citizens, on behalf of the Ankenbrandt children for damages caused by their alleged sexual and physical abuse. Carol Ankenbrandt brought suit in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana and asserted federal jurisdiction under the diversity of citizenship provision of 28 U.S.C. § 1332. The defendants moved to dismiss for lack of jurisdiction, contending that the subject matter of the case, although itself a tort action, necessarily placed it within the domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction. The district court granted the defendants' motion, citing In re Burrus for the proposition that "[t]he whole subject of the domestic relations . . . belongs to the laws of the States and not to the laws of the United States." As an alternative basis for its holding, the district court concluded that, because adjudication of the raised issues would require it to "become overly involved in the state court's determination" of the underlying abuse and custody determinations—which themselves fell squarely within the domestic relations exception—Younger abstention principles required it to decline jurisdiction. On appeal, the Fifth Circuit affirmed the district court in an unpublished opinion holding that the lower court "correctly declined to exercise jurisdiction over this case by invoking the domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction" as well as general abstention principles.

Carol Ankenbrandt appealed, and the Supreme Court granted certiorari. The Court limited review to the following questions: "(1) Is there a domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction? (2) If so, does it permit a district court to abstain from exercising diversity jurisdiction over a tort action for damages? (3) Did the District Court in this case err in abstaining from exercising jurisdiction under the doctrine of Younger v. Harris?" In reviewing the Fifth Circuit decision, the Supreme Court held that the domestic relations exception did not

75 In re Burrus, 136 U.S. 586 (1890).
78 Carol Ankenbrandt continuously represented that, because of the alleged abuse, a Louisiana juvenile court had terminated her former husband's parental rights and had also permanently enjoined him from contact with the children. In reaching a determination on the merits, none of the reviewing courts found it necessary to address the accuracy or implications of her representations.
81 See Ankenbrandt v. Richards, 112 S. Ct. 855, 855 (citation omitted).
bar the district court from accepting jurisdiction over the suit and that the Eastern District of Louisiana had therefore erred in abstaining. 82

The Court said that, although "technically dicta," the statements made in Barber formed the basis for exempting divorce, alimony, and custody decree cases from federal diversity jurisdiction. 83 The Court observed that the Barber Court did not rely on the constitutional boundaries of Article III, Section 2 84 in justifying the exception. Instead, the Barber majority had grounded the limitation upon the narrower language of the Judiciary Act of 1789, 85 whose defining phrase "all suits of a civil nature at common law or in equity" remained a "key element" demarcating the terms of diversity jurisdiction prior to congressional replacement of the operative language in 1948 with the term "all civil actions." 86 Because the amendment was presumed to have been enacted "with full cognizance" of the Court's nearly century-long exception for core cases, the Court held that the extended passage of time without expression of congressional dissatisfaction reflected con-

82 On remand from the Supreme Court, the Fifth Circuit vacated and remanded the case to the district court for further proceedings. See Ankenbrandt v. Richards, No. 91-3037 (5th Cir. Aug. 13, 1992) (unpublished opinion on file with the author).

83 See Ankenbrandt, 112 S. Ct. at 2208. The diversity statute as enacted in 1789 read as follows: "[T]he circuit courts shall have original cognizance, concurrent with the courts of several states, of all suits of a civil nature at common law or in equity . . . ." Act of Sept. 24, 1789, § 11, 1 Stat. 73, 78. The federal diversity statute was amended in 1948 to provide that diversity jurisdiction extends to "all civil actions." Act of June 25, 1948, ch. 646, § 1332, 62 Stat. 930 (codified as amended at 28 U.S.C. § 1332 (1988)). The present diversity statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1332, provides in pertinent part that:

- (a) The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of all civil actions where the matter in controversy exceeds the sum or value of $50,000, exclusive of interest and costs, and is between—
  - (1) citizens of different States;
  - (2) citizens of a State and citizens or subjects of a foreign state . . . .


85 Act of Sept. 24, 1789, ch. 20, § 11, 1 Stat. 73, 78.

gressional approval of a domestic relations exception for such actions. Although the Court acknowledged that the Barber majority had not expressly referred to the diversity statute's limitation on "suits of a civil nature at common law or in equity," it reasoned that the Barber majority's silence as to the dissent's reasoning could fairly be inferred to mean that the majority's reasoning rested on the same basis. With respect to Carol Ankenbrandt, however, the Court allowed her to pursue a tort action in federal court because her lawsuit did not seek a divorce, alimony or custody decree. The Court did not, however, enunciate any guiding principles for lower courts to follow in making future determinations.

Finally, the Court ruled that the district court erred in positing the doctrine of Younger abstention as an alternative ground for its holding, "because the federal courts have a 'virtually unflagging obligation . . . to exercise the jurisdiction given them.' The Court also surmised that future cases involving elements of the domestic relationship, even when the parties do not seek divorce, alimony or child custody, might implicate Burford abstention. For example, this occurs when a case presents "difficult questions of state law bearing on policy problems of substantial public import whose importance transcends the result of the case then at bar." Under such circumstances, "it may be appropriate for the court to retain jurisdiction to insure prompt and just disposition of the matter upon the determination by the state court of the relevant issue."

87 Id. at 2215; see also Sutter v. Pitts, 639 F.2d 842, 843 (1st Cir. 1981) ("[T]he exception has endured for too long for us to abandon it in the absence of contrary action by Congress or the Supreme Court."); Cherry v. Cherry, 438 F. Supp. 88, 90 (D. Md. 1977) ("[T]he court is unwilling to increase the workload of this already overburdened court by ignoring a rule that has existed for over 100 years without any intimation of Congressional disapproval.").

Professor Martin Redish has criticized this approach to federal jurisdiction by commenting that it "often seems irrelevant that something is being done incorrectly, as long as it has been done incorrectly long enough." Martin H. Redish, Federal Common Law, Political Legitimacy, and the Interpretive Process: An "Institutionalist" Perspective, 83 Nw. U. L. Rev. 761, 801-03 (1989). Although I share Professor Redish's frustration, barring either Supreme Court reversal or congressional revision, lower courts are bound by such declarations.

88 Ankenbrandt, 112 S. Ct. at 2206.
89 Id. at 2213.
90 Id. at 2215.
91 Id.
92 Id. (quoting Colorado River Water Conservation Dist. v. United States, 424 U.S. 800, 817 (1976)). Specifically, the district court had erred in relying on abstention principles because the Supreme Court had never before applied notions of comity under circumstances "when no state proceeding was pending nor any assertion of important state interests made." Id. at 2216 (citing Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37 (1971)).
93 Ankenbrandt, 112 S. Ct. at 2216 (quoting Colorado River, 424 U.S. at 814).
94 Id. at 2216 n.8.
Justice Blackmun concurred in the result reached by the majority while strenuously criticizing its reasoning.\textsuperscript{95} Addressing the majority's statutory interpretation, Justice Blackmun stated that, despite the majority holding that § 1332 provides an exception for cases involving divorce, alimony, or child custody, "no such exception appears in the statute."\textsuperscript{96}

Justice Blackmun reasoned instead that the statute unambiguously extended district court jurisdiction to "all civil actions" between diverse parties meeting the requisite amount in controversy requirement. He said that he had "great difficulty" with the majority's approach because statutory language is ordinarily "conclusive" absent a "clearly expressed" intention to the contrary.\textsuperscript{97} He could, therefore, "not see how a language change that, if anything, expands the jurisdictional scope of the statute can constitute evidence of approval of a prior narrow construction."\textsuperscript{98} Congressional failure to refer expressly to domestic relations matters when amending the diversity statute proved at most that Congress did not realize § 1332 contained a domestic relations exception.\textsuperscript{99}

In addition, Justice Blackmun expressed the view that the "longstanding" federal court practice of refusing to hear core domestic relations cases is "precedent at most for continued discretionary abstention,"\textsuperscript{100} which would provide a more "principled basis" for federal court disinclination to entertain domestic relations matters.\textsuperscript{101} He did not, however, elaborate on the circumstances in which abstention might apply in the future. Finally, Justice Blackmun cautioned that given the Court's construction of the phrase "common law or equity" to exclude divorce, alimony, and custody matters, the majority "casts grave doubts" upon the viability of such cases arising under Article III's grant of federal question jurisdiction over cases "in Law and Equity."\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{95} Id. at 2217 (Blackmun, J., concurring).
\textsuperscript{96} Id.
\textsuperscript{97} Id. at 2217 (citing Consumer Prod. Safety Comm'n v. GTE Sylvania, Inc., 447 U.S. 102, 108 (1980)).
\textsuperscript{98} Ankenbrandt, 112 S. Ct. at 2217 (Blackmun, J., concurring).
\textsuperscript{99} Id.; see also Daniel J. Meltzer, The Judiciary's Bicentennial, 56 U. Chi. L. Rev. 423, 435 (1989) (noting that Congress ordinarily "has not been very attentive to legislation concerning the judiciary. It took nearly eight years for Congress to relieve the Justices of their circuit riding duties.").
\textsuperscript{100} Ankenbrandt, 112 S. Ct. at 2217 (Blackmun, J., concurring).
\textsuperscript{101} Id. at 2221; see also id. at 2221 n.9 ("As this Court has previously observed that the various types of abstention are not 'rigid pigeonholes,' there is no need to affix a label to the abstention principles I suggest." (quoting Pennzoil Co. v. Texaco Inc., 481 U.S. 1, 11 n.9 (1987))).
\textsuperscript{102} Id. at 2221 n.8 (citing U.S. CONST. art. III, § 2).
Also concurring in the Court’s judgment, Justice Stevens noted that, regardless of individual views of the scope or application of the domestic relations exception, *Ankenbrandt* “should be an exceedingly easy case” because none of the Justices believed that the exception applied to the case at bar.\textsuperscript{103} Accordingly, Justice Stevens stated that, he “would leave for another day consideration of whether any domestic relations cases necessarily fall outside of the jurisdiction of the federal courts and of what, if any, principle would justify such an exception to federal jurisdiction.”\textsuperscript{104}

While the Supreme Court’s decision in *Ankenbrandt* failed to establish sufficiently clear standards for federal courts to address domestic relations cases and resolve their conflicting approaches, logical extension of *Ankenbrandt*’s reasoning indicates that federal court jurisdiction extends to all cases not expressly included in its interdiction. Regardless of what may be read from Justice Stevens’s concurrence, the Court granted certiorari to explore the question of a domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction and proceeded to exclude only certain core cases.

The Court’s reaffirmation of a domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction is also a narrowing one, prohibiting only “grants of divorce, alimony and child custody decrees.” This concentration divides the category of core cases into two subcategories: (1) the granting of divorce, alimony, and child custody decrees (“primary core cases”) and (2) all other cases in the core category (“secondary core cases”). Secondary core cases include proceedings for guardianship, affiliation, emancipation, truancy, neglect, abuse, adoption, and delinquency, as well as applications for name change and orders of protection. The *Ankenbrandt* opinion is entirely silent about the viability of federal adjudication of core enforcement cases. This silence is surprising in light of the fact that *Barber* itself is a core enforcement case. By not including secondary core and core enforcement cases among those prohibited by its interpretation of the Judiciary Act of 1789 and its subsequent amendments, the Court’s ruling strongly implies that federal courts will have jurisdiction over these two categories of cases, provided they meet diversity or other jurisdictional requirements.

The Court’s remand of Carol Ankenbrandt’s tort suit to the Eastern District of Louisiana on the grounds that it did not seek a primary core determination clearly demonstrates federal jurisdiction over domestic tort cases, even though the Court declined to delineate any

\textsuperscript{103} Id. at 2222 (Stevens and Thomas, JJ., concurring).

\textsuperscript{104} Id.
guidelines for future lower court review. Moreover, even if the phrase “in Law and Equity” in the constitutional context has the same force as does “common law or equity” in the statutory context, such a limitation at most serves only to exclude primary core determinations from federal review. Hence, federal jurisdiction exists for all other suits seeking redress for violations of constitutional rights. Finally, although the Court suggested that Burford abstention could be appropriate in future domestic relations cases, it did not explain how such abstention would apply. A proposal for this type of abstention is set forth below.105

The majority of the domestic relations cases rendered after Ankenbrandt have cited that decision for the proposition that core cases are excluded from federal jurisdiction.106 At the same time, a small number of cases relying upon Ankenbrandt have discreetly applied abstention principles.107 Yet, to date, no court has attempted to explain the parameters of the domestic relations exception following Ankenbrandt. This lack of explanation is especially glaring as to Ankenbrandt’s abstention components. Indeed, individual courts—even within the same circuit—seem confused regarding the application of abstention principles in this context. For example, one district court judge dismissed a child custody determination because it was beyond the court’s jurisdiction,108 while a second judge of the same court both abstained from and dismissed the same type of action for lack of jurisdiction.109

105 See infra notes 169–224 and accompanying text.


109 SeeDurr v. Mobley, 92 Civ. 8549 (SS), 1993 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 4601 (S.D.N.Y. April 12, 1993). The approach taken in Greig has met with favor in other circuits. See, e.g., Kahn v. Kahn, 21 F.3d 859 (9th Cir. 1994) (federal suit between former spouses based on former marital assets was precluded on basis of domestic relations exception rather than deferred on abstention principles); Lee v. Washington, No. 91-36277, 1993 U.S. App. LEXIS 2897 (9th Cir. Oct. 7, 1992).
proposal setting the parameters of a coherent abstention doctrine modelled after Ankenbrandt is set forth below in Part II.C.

II. SETTING THE PARAMETERS OF JURISDICTION AND ABSTENTION IN DOMESTIC RELATIONS CASES

This Part considers the issue of whether and how federal courts might exercise jurisdiction in non-primary core cases. Section A reviews the debate between advocates of mandatory jurisdiction and scholars who support judicially created exceptions to the assertion of federal court jurisdiction. Section B sets forth the existing abstention doctrines and considers their applicability to domestic relations matters. Section C proposes a new form of abstention based on the Ankenbrandt decision.

A. The Debate Between Mandatory Jurisdiction and Equitable Restraint

If federal district courts have jurisdiction over non-primary core cases, are they required to exercise the full extent of that authority? In other words, must federal courts hear all cases that fulfill statutorily created jurisdictional requirements, or may they decline jurisdiction through the equitable doctrine of abstention? This issue is the subject of a significant and unresolved debate among several august federal courts scholars. Although definitive resolution of that controversy is beyond the scope of this Article, it is a question that must be addressed if the new form of abstention proposed below is to be considered.

Over a century ago, in Cohens v. Virginia, Chief Justice John Marshall observed that: “We have no more right to decline the exercise of jurisdiction which is given, than to usurp that which is not given. The one or the other would be treason to the Constitution.” This

(holding that lack of jurisdiction rather than abstention was appropriate reason for district court’s dismissal of suit based on child custody).

The discussion in this Section excludes subject matter areas where Congress has specifically prohibited federal court adjudication. See, e.g., 28 U.S.C. § 1341 (1988) (Tax Injunction Act) (“The district courts shall not enjoin, suspend or restrain the assessment, levy or collection of any tax under State law where a plain, speedy and efficient remedy may be had in the courts of such State.”); 28 U.S.C. § 1342 (1988) (Johnson Act) (“The district courts shall not enjoin, suspend or restrain the operation of, or compliance with, any order affecting rates chargeable by a public utility . . . .”); 28 U.S.C. § 2283 (1988) (Anti-Injunction Act) (“A court of the United States may not grant an injunction to stay proceedings in a State court except as expressly authorized by Act of Congress, or where necessary in aid of its jurisdiction, or to protect or effectuate its judgments.”).

111 19 U.S. (6 Wheat.) 264 (1821).

112 Id. at 404.
premise, which has gained standing through repetition, is the mainstay of a federal courts philosophy of mandatory jurisdiction whose followers believe that federal courts must adjudicate all cases within their jurisdictional purview.

The chief proponent of the mandatory jurisdiction theory is Professor Martin Redish, who utilizes a separation-of-powers model. Professor Redish argues that our constitutional democracy vests the unrepresentative judiciary with the power to invalidate statutes enacted by a representatively elected legislature. By extension, those democratic principles "clearly prohibit" federal courts from "openly ignoring a legislative judgment on any ground other than unconstitutionality." Consequently, discretionary jurisdictional doctrines such as abstention amount to insupportable "usurpations" of legislative authority.

In addition to Professor Redish, Professors Robert Clinton, Donald Doernberg and Donald Zeigler support the mandatory jurisdiction theory. Professor Clinton exhaustively surveys the legislative

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115 See, e.g., Kline v. Burke Constr. Co., 260 U.S. 226, 234 (1922) (where plaintiff invokes federal jurisdiction federal court is "bound to take the case and proceed to judgment"); Mondou v. New York, N.H. & H.R.R., 223 U.S. 58 (1912) ("existence of jurisdiction creates an implication of duty to exercise it"); Board of Comm'rs v. Aspinwall, 65 U.S. (24 How.) 376, 385 (1861) (federal courts may not turn away claimants who have satisfied jurisdiction and process requirements); Hyde v. Stone, 61 U.S. (20 How.) 170, 175 (1857) (district courts cannot abdicate their duty to adjudicate all properly brought actions). For a recent, non-Supreme Court case, see Burns v. Water, 931 F.2d 140, 145 (1st Cir. 1991) ("Turning to the merits, we begin by noting that the principle that federal courts are obligated to determine a case once federal subject matter jurisdiction has been properly invoked was established early in the history of our system of courts."). An equally famous extension of Justice Marshall's statement in Cohens was announced in the abstention context. See Colorado River Water Conservation Dist. v. United States, 424 U.S. 800, 817 (1976) (Federal courts have a "virtually unflagging obligation . . . to exercise the jurisdiction given them."); see also Deakins v. Monaghan, 484 U.S. 193 (1988) (quoting Colorado River, 424 U.S. 800).

116 See id. at 74.

117 See id. passim.

118 See generally Clinton, supra note 84.


115 Redish, Separation of Powers, supra note 114, at 73.

history of Article III to prove that the Framers contemplated mandatory jurisdiction. Also relying on legislative history, in this case of the Civil Rights Act of 1871 as interpreted by the Supreme Court in 

Mitchum v. Foster, Professor Zeigler asserts that federal courts occupy a position of "primacy" in the adjudication of cases arising under their auspices. Professor Doernberg, in turn, emphasizes the lack of textual and historical support for the Supreme Court's refusal to exercise its original jurisdiction.

In contrast to the mandatory jurisdiction school of federal courts theory, several federal courts scholars argue that federal courts are empowered with the necessary discretion to assert or decline jurisdiction. The most renowned of these commentators, Professor David Shapiro, maintains that discretion is a time-honored component of grants of jurisdiction, with roots in both common law and equity. Thus, rather than being an untenable usurpation of the legislative function, "open acknowledgement of reasoned discretion is wholly consistent with the Anglo-American legal tradition" and lends itself to effectual rules for governing federal court jurisdiction.

121 See Clinton, supra note 84, passim.


124 See Doernberg, supra note 119, passim.


127 Professor Shapiro proposes that (1) equitable discretion, (2) federalism and comity, (3) separation of powers, and (4) judicial administration provide the "appropriate criteria for channeling discretion in matters of jurisdiction." See Shapiro, Jurisdiction and Discretion, supra note 126, at 579 & passim.
In addition to Professor Shapiro, Professors Ann Althouse,129 Jack Beermann,130 Barry Friedman131 and Michael Wells132 have argued for the necessity of discretion. Professor Althouse points out that mandatory jurisdiction theory both neglects and relies upon statutory interpretation by the judiciary to argue that it is "treasonous" for federal courts to decline jurisdiction.133 Professor Beermann suggests that Professor Redish's thesis is grounded in outdated notions regarding the separation of powers that fail to account for the modern "shared powers" view.134 Contrary to Professor Clinton, Professor Friedman asserts that Article III lacks sufficient textual support to maintain a theory of mandatory jurisdiction.135 Finally, Professor Wells maintains that, contrary to Professor Ziegler's view, Congress left the boundaries of § 1983 to the judiciary.136

In addition to the above criticisms of mandatory jurisdiction offered by these academic scholars, three insightful criticisms of the theory have been offered by attorney James Rehnquist.137 First, Mr. Rehnquist points out that Chief Justice Marshall's statement in Cohens is dictum; the Court in Cohens was deciding the appellate jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and not original district court jurisdiction. Thus, if the Cohens Court created any "obligation" to hear cases, that obligation only applied to the Supreme Court itself and not to the lower federal courts. Second, Mr. Rehnquist observes that the logical extension of Professor Redish's theory would make "treasonous" any federal court exercise of jurisdiction not explicitly authorized by Congress.139

133 See Althouse, supra note 129, passim.
134 See Beermann, supra note 130, passim.
135 See Friedman, supra note 131, passim.
136 See Wells, supra note 132, passim.
137 The reasoning is set forth in Mr. Rehnquist's excellent article. See James C. Rehnquist, Taking Comity Seriously: How To Neutralize The Abstention Doctrine, 46 STAN. L. REV. 1049, 1102-03 & n.303 (1994).
138 It seems profoundly ironic that in both the Barber and Cohens decisions it was dicta that engendered so much difficulty.
139 See Bank of the United States v. Deveaux, 9 U.S. (5 Cranch) 61, 87 (1809) ("The duties of this court, to exercise jurisdiction where it is conferred, and not to usurp it, where it is not conferred, are of equal obligation.").
Such a view would have invalidated pendent jurisdiction prior to enactment of § 1367, as well as the ability of federal courts to dispose of various collateral issues after their jurisdiction has technically expired. Third, Professor Redish's assertions to the contrary, Congress does in fact delegate jurisdictional discretion to the district courts. One instance of this delegation occurs whenever Congress enacts legislation without explicitly setting forth a limitations period.

B. Recognized Abstention Doctrines

Attractive as the purity of mandatory jurisdiction may be in the abstract, abstention is very much a reality. The Supreme Court has recognized four primary abstention doctrines, each of which is

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named after the case in which its principles were first enunciated.\textsuperscript{145} (1) \textit{Railroad Commission v. Pullman Co.} ("Pullman abstention"),\textsuperscript{145} (2) \textit{Burford v. Sun Oil Co.} ("Burford abstention"),\textsuperscript{147} (3) \textit{Younger v. Harris} ("Younger abstention"),\textsuperscript{148} and (4) \textit{Colorado River Water Conservation District v. United States} ("Colorado River abstention").\textsuperscript{149} Each of these seminal cases, discussed in chronological order below, has been followed in turn by secondary cases which have sought, with varying degrees of success, to explicate and apply the jurisdictional boundaries

\textsuperscript{145}There are also equitable precursors to the formal abstention doctrine cases. See, e.g., Spielman Motor Sales Co. v. Dodge, 295 U.S. 89 (1935) (barring exceptional circumstances a federal court sitting in equity will not interfere with a state criminal prosecution); Pennsylvania v. Williams, 594 U.S. 176 (1935) (federal equity court will not appoint a liquidating receiver when state procedure existed); Gilchrist v. Interborough Rapid Transit Co., 279 U.S. 159 (1929) (federal court deference to state court interpretation of complex regulatory scheme); Fenner v. Boykin, 271 U.S. 240 (1926) (only exceptional circumstances warrant federal court staying state officials from commencing criminal prosecution). For a more complete collection of these cases, see Burford v. Sun Oil Co., 319 U.S. 315, 333 n.29 (1943); Railroad Comm’n v. Pullman Co., 312 U.S. 496, 500–01 (1941).


of abstention.150 Burford abstention has propagated corollaries in Alabama Public Service Commission v. Southern Railway,151 Louisiana Power & Light Co. v. City of Thibodaux,152 New Orleans Public Service, Inc. v. Council of New Orleans,153 and most recently, Ankenbrandt.154 Because this Article will show that Burford type abstention is the most pertinent to domestic relations matters, each of the Burford corollaries is addressed at length in Section C below.155

1. Pullman Abstention

In Pullman, the Supreme Court first coined the term "abstention" to describe a district court's refusal to exert its jurisdiction.156 Under Pullman, federal courts may postpone hearing cases over which they have jurisdiction if resolution of an unclear or unconstrued state issue might avoid a constitutional question,157 even in the absence of a


151 360 U.S. at 29–30.


153 See infra text accompanying notes 169–213.

154 See infra text accompanying notes 169–213.

155 See infra text accompanying notes 169–213.


157 See Pullman, 312 U.S. at 501. In Pullman, black porters challenged the constitutionality of a Texas Railroad Commission order requiring railway sleeper cars to be supervised by conductors, who were all white. The Court held that the district court should have abstained from the case so it could be resolved by a Texas state court. See id. at 497–98. As Professor Martha Field has aptly noted, the underlying rationale of Pullman is questionable at best, because the state law question was neither complex nor unclear. See Field, supra note 144, at 1078 nn.22–23. In addition, Pullman marked a departure from general federal courts practice that when issues are
pending state proceeding.\textsuperscript{158} Although originally applied to a request for equitable relief,\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Pullman} has been enlarged to include suits at law.\textsuperscript{160} Under \textit{Pullman}, unless a litigant voluntarily submits her federal claims for state court determination, she reserves the right to submit or relitigate federal issues of law with the abstaining district court.\textsuperscript{161}

2. \textit{Burford} Abstention

Although delineated in greater detail below, the basic tenet of \textit{Burford} abstention is that federal courts will not adjudicate complex state law questions that are related to state administrative procedures.\textsuperscript{162} The outer boundaries of the \textit{Burford} abstention doctrine are unclear, because subsequent cases extend \textit{Burford} to state judicial proceedings. Like \textit{Pullman} abstention, \textit{Burford} does not require a pending parallel state action. Unlike \textit{Pullman}, when jurisdiction is ceded to the state court system under \textit{Burford}, litigants are usually barred from returning to federal fora.\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{158}\textit{See Pullman}, 312 U.S. at 501–02 (holding that, in the absence of a pending state action, one should be brought while the federal court retained jurisdiction over the federal claim).

\textsuperscript{159}\textit{Id.} at 497.


\textsuperscript{162}\textit{See Burford v. Sun Oil Co.}, 319 U.S. 527 (1943).

\textsuperscript{163}\textit{See}, \textit{e.g.}, American Bank & Trust Co. v. Dent, 982 F.2d 917, 922 n.5 (5th Cir. 1993); Brandenburg v. Seidel, 859 F.2d 1179, 1195 n.18 (4th Cir. 1988); Griffin Hosp. v. Commission on Hosps. & Health Care, 782 F.2d 24, 25 n.1 (2d Cir. 1986).
3. **Younger Abstention**

The *Younger* abstention doctrine originally prohibited federal courts from enjoining ongoing state court criminal proceedings.\(^1\) It has now been expanded, in certain instances, to both civil and administrative actions brought by states in their own tribunals.\(^2\) Subsequent to *Younger* abstention, criminal defendants may use habeas corpus proceedings to return to federal court after their state court convictions.\(^3\)

4. **Colorado River Abstention**

In *Colorado River*, the United States Supreme Court held that federal courts may abstain from hearing cases when the parties seek coterminous resolution in the respective state courts and the federal courts are presented with "truly unusual" facts.\(^4\)

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4. See *Colorado River Water Conservation Dist. v. United States*, 424 U.S. 809, 817-19 (1976). In *Colorado River*, the United States brought an action against some 1,000 water users seeking a declaration of its rights to Colorado river water under both federal and state statutory law. Shortly afterward, one of the defendants attempted to join the United States in a pending state administrative proceeding wherein the United States's rights could be determined. See id. at 806. When the United States was joined in the state proceeding, the federal defendants succeeded in persuading the district court to abstain from hearing the case. The Tenth Circuit reversed the district court only to be reversed in turn by the Supreme Court. See id. To assist future lower court consideration of whether abstention was warranted, the Court listed six factors for consideration, including the "clear federal policy" of "avoiding piecemeal adjudication." See id. at 819.

In *Moses H. Cone Memorial Hosp. v. Mercury Constr. Corp.*, 460 U.S. 1 (1983), the Court revisited its *Colorado River* decision. This time, the Court held that abstention was not warranted due to the absence of "exceptional circumstances." Id. at 16. In an attempt to clarify its ruling, the Court set forth a balancing test that included the following six factors: (1) assertion of jurisdiction; (2) federal forum inconvenience; (3) avoidance of piecemeal litigation; (4) temporal primacy of jurisdiction; (5) applicability of the forum's law; and (6) state court ability to protect federal rights. See id. at 15-16.
Colorado River abstention normally precludes federal forum relitigation. 168

C. Applying Abstention Principles to Non-Primary Core Domestic Relations Cases

1. Applying Burford Abstention to Domestic Relations Cases

When examining the validity of abstaining from domestic relations cases, federal courts have relied upon each of the Pullman, 169 Burford, 170 Younger 171 and Colorado River 172 abstention doctrines. Several courts have also abstained from hearing domestic relations matters without referring to a specific abstention doctrine, relying instead on a general principle that federal courts decline jurisdiction over domestic relations cases. 173 Although cases arising under any of the individual abstention doctrines may present valid reasons for federal court abstention, the Burford line of cases is the most pertinent to the domestic relations context because it allows federal courts to defer to state courts...
in areas of traditional state court expertise. In the remainder of this Article, I will first explain why the Court’s reasoning in Ankenbrandt demonstrates that Burford abstention principles may apply to non-primary core domestic suits, and will then delineate the parameters for Burford-type abstention in this area.

2. A Closer Examination of Burford and Its Progeny

In 1943, only two years after Pullman, the Texas Railroad Commission was once more a principal in an abstention case before the

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174 See Ankenbrandt v. Richards, 112 S. Ct. 2206, 2216 (1992); see also Nasser v. City of Homewood, 671 F.2d 492, 493–40 (11th Cir. 1982) (describing Burford abstention as "perhaps the most potent device" for declining jurisdiction). The scope of Burford abstention is not, however, unlimited. For example, Burford abstention has been held not to bar civil rights litigation. See, e.g., Association for Retarded Citizens of N. Am. v. Olson, 713 F.2d 1384, 1391 (8th Cir. 1983) ("Cases involving questions of civil rights are the least likely candidates for abstention."); United States v. Puerto Rico, 764 F. Supp. 220, 226 (D.P.R. 1991) (holding abstention "particularly inappropriate in civil rights cases" (quoting Association of Relatives & Friends of AIDS Patients v. Regulations & Permits Admin., 740 F. Supp. 95, 102 (D.P.R. 1990))).

175 Before explicating the relevance of Burford abstention, it bears noting why the other abstention doctrines are less appropriate than Burford in the domestic relations context. Pullman abstention requires federal courts to abstain from hearing cases that state courts can resolve by applying state law in a manner that relieves federal courts from making constitutional determinations. However, because federal question cases usually raise constitutional issues that are beyond the scope of related core cases, a federal court abstaining under the Pullman doctrine will not ordinarily be able to have constitutional issues resolved through other means by a state court. At best, a district court may abstain in order to facilitate state adjudication of everything but the constitutional issues. Although such action is entirely valid—indeed it parallels the proposal set forth below—it is not in accord with the goals established by Pullman.

Similarly, although it is often mentioned, Younger abstention is not germane to the domestic relations exception because it generally prohibits federal courts from enjoining ongoing state court criminal, civil, and administrative proceedings. The thrust of domestic relations cases is therefore inapposite to Younger abstention. Federal courts are more than willing to allow state courts to resolve cases with domestic underpinnings and are thus unlikely to hinder state court litigation in favor of their own determination. But see Parker v. Turner, 626 F.2d 1, 8 (6th Cir. 1980); Neustein v. Orbach, 732 F. Supp. 333, 341–42 (E.D.N.Y. 1990); DeWyse v. Smith, 535 F. Supp. 852, 856 (W.D. Mich. 1982).

Finally, because Colorado River abstention is contingent upon "exceptional circumstances" presenting "truly unusual" facts which in the past have focused on the geographical disparity of large numbers of parties, Colorado River issues are unlikely to arise in the context of domestic disputes. But see Friends of Children, Inc. v. Matava, 766 F.2d 35, 36–37 (1st Cir. 1985); Kelsor v. Anne Arundel County Dep’t of Social Servs., 679 F.2d 1092, 1094 (4th Cir. 1982); Acord v. Parsons, 551 F. Supp. 115 (W.D. Va. 1982); Zaubi v. Hoejme, 530 F. Supp. 831, 834 (W.D. Pa. 1980).
Supreme Court. In *Burford*, the Sun Oil Company filed suit in federal court challenging the legitimacy of a Texas Railroad Commission ruling that allowed a rival oil company to drill and pump oil wells on a commonly held oil field. Sun Oil's claim could have been brought in Travis County court, which routinely exercised review over the Commission's rulings. Instead, a federal action was brought under both diversity and federal question jurisdiction, asserting the invalidity of the Commission's ruling on both state statutory and federal constitutional grounds. The three-judge district court dismissed the suit, and Sun Oil appealed.

Upholding the district court, the Supreme Court described the Texas courts as "working partners with the Railroad Commission in the business of creating a regulatory system for the oil industry" that should be allowed unimpeded exercise of their expertise. Although the Court did not characterize the Texas courts' judicial input into the Commission's decisions as either judicial or legislative, by affirming the district court the Supreme Court directed any further action by Sun Oil to the Travis County court.

While the Court did not elaborate on the abstention principles set forth in the *Pullman* decision, it did cite *Pullman* as support for denying injunctive relief in order to defer to a state's public policy interest:

"Equity's discretion to decline to exercise its jurisdiction may be applied when judicial restraint seems required by considerations of general welfare. "Courts of equity may, and frequently do, go much farther both to give and withhold relief in furtherance of the public interest than they are accustomed to go when only private interests are involved."

Although some courts have interpreted *Burford* to apply only to administrative cases, commentators have pointed out that the Court

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177 See id. at 315–17.
178 See id. at 325–26.
179 See id. at 316–17.
180 See id. at 326.
182 In fact, following district court dismissal of its suit, Sun Oil obtained the exact relief in state court that it had sought from the federal forum. See Burford v. Sun Oil Co., 186 S.W.2d 306 (Tex. Civ. App. 1944).
has not clearly delineated the circumstances under which Burford abstention is appropriate.184 Professor Gordon Young posits that, although state interest justified abstention in Burford, “the administrative nature of the state law . . . tipped the scales.”185 I believe Professor Young’s conclusion is correct. As Justice Felix Frankfurter observed, even scholars at the time of the Burford decision treated administrative law as “exotic.”186 The Court may have therefore been inclined to let states sort out this “exotic” area of law on their own.

Moreover, the bright line drawn by requiring the presence of administrative action in order to invoke Burford abstention is no longer operative. The fine work of Professors Richard Fallon and Daniel Meltzer has demonstrated that the line between law making and law application is now severely blurred.187 The opinions of several courts reflect this blurring. For example, in Planned Parenthood League v. Bellotti,188 the First Circuit held that Burford suggests abstention even when the state agency is the judiciary,189 and at least two other First Circuit decisions have followed that reasoning.190 Similarly, the Second Circuit seems to have abrogated any connection with state administrative proceedings for Burford abstention.191 The Fifth Circuit has determined in DuBroff v. DuBroff that Burford abstention is appropriate in domestic relations cases because “there is perhaps no state administr-
tive scheme in which federal court intrusions are less appropriate than domestic relations law.\textsuperscript{192}

The Supreme Court revisited \textit{Burford} eight years after its original decision in yet another case involving a railroad litigant. In \textit{Alabama Public Service Commission v. Southern Railway}, the Court reversed a district court exercise of jurisdiction on abstention grounds.\textsuperscript{193} In \textit{Alabama Public Service}, the Southern Railway Company challenged a state commission decision denying its petition to discontinue a certain service line. As in \textit{Burford}, although a state court remedy existed, the railroad sought to enjoin the state commission in federal court.\textsuperscript{194} Emphasizing the "primary authority" of the states over intrastate rail operations, the Court reversed the district court in favor of abstention.\textsuperscript{195} The Court's ruling evoked not only sensitivity to a peculiarly local concern, but also deference to the state court that would ultimately resolve the railroad's challenge. \textit{Alabama Public Service} therefore acceded not only to administrative law concerns, but also to the province of state court determination of an issue of state public policy.

After another eight-year interval, the Supreme Court, in \textit{Louisiana Power & Light Co. v. City of Thibodaux},\textsuperscript{196} revisited the \textit{Burford} line of abstention cases.\textsuperscript{197} In \textit{Thibodaux}, the Court upheld a district court's decision to abstain from hearing an eminent domain proceeding that also could have been initiated in state court.\textsuperscript{198} In an opinion authored by Justice Frankfurter, the Court reasoned that issues of unclear state law so "intimately involved with sovereign prerogative" justified the district court's abstention.\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{192}833 F.2d 557, 561-62 (5th Cir. 1987). This decision was apparently (and ironically) overlooked by the \textit{Ankenbrandt} appellate decisions.

\textsuperscript{193}341 U.S. 341, 345-51 (1951).

\textsuperscript{194}See id. at 342-43.

\textsuperscript{195}See id. at 345.


\textsuperscript{197}See Colorado River Water Conservation Dist. v. United States, 424 U.S. 800, 814 (1976) (suggesting that \textit{Thibodaux} abstention is a subset of \textit{Burford} abstention). Professor Young has posited the inverse. Namely, that \textit{Burford} (and by implication, \textit{Ankenbrandt}) are subsets of the generally larger \textit{Thibodaux} doctrine. See Young, \textit{supra} note 147, at 940-46. My position is that \textit{Burford} abstention really has two prongs, one requiring administrative action and the other which does not require administrative action, and that the gap between the two, paralleling the gap between law-making and law-finding, has narrowed considerably.

\textsuperscript{198}See \textit{Thibodaux}, 360 U.S. at 28-29.

\textsuperscript{199}Id. Justice Frankfurter performed a leading role in the development of abstention theory. See generally Note, \textit{Federal-Question Abstention: Justice Frankfurter's Doctrine in an Activist Era}, 80 HARV. L. REV. 604 (1967).
Thibodaux reinforced the Alabama Public Service Court's expansion of Burford abstention to include deference to state courts outside the administrative context because of sensitivity to state public policy concerns. While Alabama Public Service deferred to the "primary authority" of states,\(^{200}\) Thibodaux yielded to an area "intimately involved with sovereign prerogative."\(^{201}\) In both of these cases—as in Burford—the Court recognized that the underlying actions could have been initiated in state court and that each of these cases had the practical effect of returning the matters to the respective state courts.\(^{202}\)

Thirty years after Burford, the Supreme Court re-examined abstention from cases involving state administrative agency action in New Orleans Public Service, Inc. v. Council of New Orleans ("NOPSI").\(^{203}\) In NOPSI, the plaintiffs challenged a ratemaking decision of the New Orleans City Council in federal court, asserting that an earlier Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ruling preempted the Council's ruling. The district court refused to exercise jurisdiction for several reasons, including Burford abstention. The Fifth Circuit affirmed and the plaintiffs appealed.\(^{204}\)

The Supreme Court reversed the Fifth Circuit, declining to apply Burford abstention because, inter alia, federal adjudication of the pre-emption claim "would not disrupt the State's attempt to ensure uniformity in the treatment of an 'essentially local problem.'"\(^{205}\) The Court explained that, pending available state court review, Burford abstention was proper:

(1) when there are "difficult questions of state law bearing on policy problems of substantial public import whose importance transcends the result in the case then at bar;" or (2) where the "exercise of federal review of the question in a case and in similar cases would be disruptive of state efforts to establish a coherent policy with respect to a matter of substantial public concern."\(^{206}\)

NOPSI, therefore, stands for the proposition that "talismanic connections between a federal case and a state's administrative process will


\(^{201}\) See Thibodaux, 360 U.S. at 28-29.

\(^{202}\) See Thibodaux, 360 U.S. at 29; Alabama Pub. Serv., 341 U.S. at 342-43.

\(^{203}\) 424 U.S. 800, 814 (1976)).

\(^{204}\) Id. at 388.

\(^{205}\) Id. at 372 (quoting Alabama Pub. Serv., 341 U.S. at 347).

\(^{206}\) Id. at 361 (quoting Colorado River Water Conservation Dist. v. United States, 424 U.S. 800, 814 (1976)).
no longer justify abstention under Burford." 207 Supporting this reading is the fact that when NOPSI describes the second prong under which Burford abstention is possible—"state efforts to establish a coherent policy with respect to a matter of substantial public concern"—it is in fact using the same language that the Colorado River Court used when describing the state court proceedings in Thibodaux. 209

Finally, in Ankenbrandt, 210 the Supreme Court continued this pattern of expansion when it held that Burford abstention principles could apply to federal suits presenting "difficult questions of state law bearing on policy problems of substantial public import whose importance transcends the result of the case then at bar" or "involving elements of the domestic relationship" which "depended on a determination of the status of the parties." 211 In a footnote, the Court added that when applying Burford abstention "it may be appropriate" for the district court to retain jurisdiction over the case in order "to ensur[e] prompt and just disposition of the matter" after state court determination. 212 Ankenbrandt therefore signifies another solidification of the line of cases under Burford in which administrative action is not a prerequisite for federal court deferral to state interests.

3. Applying Ankenbrandt Abstention to Domestic Relations Cases

The majority of cases to cite the Ankenbrandt decision do so for the proposition that primary core cases are excluded from federal jurisdiction. 214 At the same time, a small number of cases relying upon Ankenbrandt have separately applied discrete principles of that case. Although none of these courts has attempted to explain the parameters of the domestic relations exception, each may be understood to develop a different aspect of the decision. The relevant cases in this group are:

207 Young, supra note 147, at 909.
208 New Orleans, 491 U.S. at 361.
209 See Colorado River, 424 U.S. at 814.
211 Id. at 2216 (quoting Colorado River, 424 U.S. at 814).
212 Id. at 2216.
213 Id. at 2216 n.8.
214 See, e.g., Wright v. Long, No. 93-1727, 1994 U.S. App. LEXIS 2431 (7th Cir. Feb. 7, 1994) (precluding core cases under the domestic jurisdictional exception); Gragg v. Nebraska, No. 93-4191-SAC, 1994 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 7330 (D. Ks. May 17, 1994) (determination of a child custody decree was within the domestic relations exception to jurisdiction); Mitchell v. Cronin, 92 Civ. 7360 (KMW), 1993 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14950 (S.D.N.Y. Oct. 19, 1993) (only applying the domestic relations exception to core cases and thus allowing a plaintiff to amend her complaint in order to prosecute a § 1983 action); Ernst v. Children & Youth Servs. of Chester County, Civ. Action
(1) *Greig v. Supreme Court of New York,*215 dismissing an action for child custody and a protection order for lack of subject matter jurisdiction;216

(2) *Nwankwo v. Nwankwo,*217 holding that domestic tort actions could proceed in federal court "unless abstention is otherwise required . . . to avoid interference with . . . important questions of state policy;"218

(3) *Lannan v. Maul,*219 declaring a breach of contract action not sufficiently enmeshed in either domestic relations or ongoing state controversy to invoke the core exception or the proper use of abstention;220

(4a) *Minot v. Eckhardt-Minot,*221 upholding a district court's decision under *Burford* to abstain from and remand a case involving the tort of custodial interference, on the ground that it was a difficult area of law not yet developed by the state courts;222 and

(4b) *Farkas v. D'Oca,*223 abstaining under *Burford* from a core matrimonial action while also maintaining jurisdiction over a


216 Id.; see also Kahn v. Kahn, 21 F.3d 859 (8th Cir. 1994) (federal suit between former spouses based on former marital assets was precluded on basis of domestic relations exception rather than deferred on abstention principles); Lee v. Washington, No. 91-36277, 1993 U.S. App. LEXIS 2687 (9th Cir. Oct. 7, 1992) (holding that lack of jurisdiction rather than abstention was appropriate reason for district court's dismissal of suit based on child custody). *But see Durr v. Mobley,* 92 Civ. 8349 (SS), 1993 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 4601 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 2, 1993) (both abstaining from and dismissing because of lack of jurisdiction, a child custody and support action).


218 Id.

219 13 F.3d 590 (2d Cir. 1994).

220 Id. at 630-31. *But see Carla K. Heathershaw, Note, A New Interpretation of the Domestic Relations Exception in the Eighth Circuit: Lannan v. Maul, 27 CREIGHTON L. REV. 853, 873 (1994) (arguing that the Eighth Circuit erred in the Lannan decision because "it found that the [domestic relations] exception could not apply in a contract case").* Ms. Heathershaw's assertion is based on a flawed reading of the *Lannan* decision. The Eighth Circuit never held that contracts were exempt from the federal court adjudication. Instead, the *Lannan* court held that the particular facts of the case at bar were not themselves enmeshed sufficiently in either the former spouses' domestic relations or an ongoing state controversy to invoke the core exception. See *Lannan,* 979 F.2d at 630-31.

221 15 F.3d 590 (2d Cir. 1994).

222 Id. at 594. The Second Circuit asserted that "the only significant recent New York State case even considering these sorts of claims is *Harley v. Harley,* 565 N.Y.S.2d 625 (1991), *appeal dismissed,* 584 N.Y.S.2d 441 (1992), and it does not illuminate the status under New York law of the torts alleged" in the case at bar. Id. at 594 n.2.

related RICO claim based on a fraudulent scheme to defraud the former spouse of marital assets.\textsuperscript{224}

Collectively, the principles that emerge from these cases are that:

(1) primary core cases lack jurisdiction and should be dismissed;
(2) non-primary core cases raising secondary core case issues have jurisdiction, but are appropriate for abstention;
(3) non-primary core cases that raise standard state law questions have jurisdiction and should be heard;
(4) when non-primary core cases raise both primary core and non-primary core issues, the court should dismiss the primary core issue and (a) abstain from the non-primary core issue raising unique state law questions, and (b) adjudicate the standard law issues.

In sum, under \textit{Ankenbrandt} abstention, federal courts would abstain from hearing all secondary core cases as well as actions raising difficult issues of unresolved state law. The reasons justifying the jurisdictional contours of \textit{Ankenbrandt} abstention are explicated in the next Part.

### III. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR HEARING NON-PRIMARY CORE DOMESTIC RELATIONS CASES

Federal courts have offered several policy reasons for declining to hear domestic relations cases arising under the diversity statute.\textsuperscript{225} These rationales include special state interest and expertise, disdain toward family law, and federal docket congestion. As demonstrated below, countervailing policies favoring federal court adjudication of non-primary core actions outweigh each of these considerations. These countervailing policy considerations include the growing national nature of family law, traditional diversity concerns of averting prejudice toward out-of-state claimants, the general institutional duty of courts to adjudicate cases within their purview, and the protection of federal rights. Interwoven with this analysis are prudential concerns of federalism, comity and parity.

\textsuperscript{224} Id.
\textsuperscript{225} See generally Poker, supra note 24, at 149 (“Although many courts doubt the validity of the constitutional and statutory rationales for the domestic relations exception, they frequently offer policy considerations to justify the exception . . . .”); Note, \textit{Federal Jurisdiction—Diversity of Citizenship—Validity of a Foreign Divorce Decree}, 54 Iowa L. Rev. 990, 994–95 (1968) (approving considerations that decline jurisdiction).
A. Non-Primary Core Diversity Cases

1. Special State Interest and Expertise

One policy reason proffered by federal courts for not hearing domestic relations cases is that states have developed a special interest and expertise in their adjudication. Specifically, district courts maintain that domestic relations cases address "local" concerns of special interest to the individual states, and that because of this interest the states have provided their judiciaries with attendant social service agencies. As a result, federal courts claim that state courts have developed an expertise for domestic cases which are thus "peculiarly unsuited

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226 Cases are repeated in the following footnotes as a way of illustrating that district courts rely upon the same rationales, often citing them verbatim from other jurisdictions. This illustrates that the exception is more a rote maxim than a well thought out doctrine. See generally Developments in the Law: The Constitution and the Family, 99 HARV. L. REV. 1156, 1198 (1986).

227 See, e.g., Drewes v. Ilnicki, 863 F.2d 469, 471 (6th Cir. 1988) (noting that the exception "continues to the present day because the field of domestic relations involves local problems"); Lloyd v. Loeffler, 694 F.2d 489, 493 (7th Cir. 1982) (federal courts "are not local institutions"); Ellis v. Hamilton, 669 F.2d 510, 515-16 (7th Cir.), cert. denied, 459 U.S. 1069 (1982) (recognizing that family law is peculiarly local, the federal courts continue to adhere tenaciously to the judge-made rule that excepts most domestic relations cases from the diversity jurisdiction); McCullough ex rel. Jordan v. McCullough, 760 F. Supp. 613, 616 (E.D. Mich. 1991) ("The field of domestic relations involves local problems . . . ."); Taylor v. Wettstein, 746 F. Supp. 713, 716 (S.D. Ohio 1989) ("It is axiomatic that the field of domestic relations involves local problems . . . ."); Yelverton v. Yelverton, 614 F. Supp. 528, 529 (N.D. Ind. 1985) ("Domestic relations matters, being of local concern, are best left to the jurisdictional province of state courts.").

228 See, e.g., Fernos-Lopez v. Figarella Lopez, 929 F.2d 20, 22 (1st Cir. 1991) (crediting "the strong state interest in domestic relations"); Vaughan v. Smithson, 883 F.2d 63, 65 (10th Cir. 1989) ("the states have a strong interest in domestic relations matters"); Raftery v. Scott, 756 F.2d 335, 345 (4th Cir. 1985) ("the state through its courts has a stronger and more direct interest in the domestic relations of its citizens than does the federal court"); Ruffalo ex rel. Ruffalo v. Civiletti, 702 F.2d 710, 717 (8th Cir. 1983) ("Federal courts have consistently refused to entertain diversity suits involving domestic relations" because of "the strong state interest in domestic relations matters"); CSIBI v. Fusco, 670 F.2d 134, 136-37 (9th Cir. 1982) ("States have an interest in family relations superior to that of the federal government . . . ."); Ellison v. Sadur, 700 F. Supp. 54, 55 (D.D.C. 1988) ("This exception is largely grounded in the belief that state courts have a particularly strong interest . . . in resolving disputes involving family relationships"); Tuerff v. Tuerff, 117 F.R.D. 674 (D. Colo. 1987) (noting the "state's strong interest in domestic relations cases").

229 See, e.g., Fernos-Lopez, 929 F.2d at 22 (acknowledging the state courts' "ability to provide ongoing supervision, the availability there of professional support services"); Vaughan, 883 F.2d at 65 (domestic "disputes often require ongoing supervision"); Rykers v. Alford, 832 F.2d 895, 899-900 (5th Cir. 1987) (domestic "disputes often require ongoing supervision"); Lloyd, 694 F.2d at 495 (the federal courts "do not have staffs of social workers"); Donnelly v. Donnelly, 515 F.2d 129, 130 (1st Cir. 1975) (yielding to "the power and the resources of state family courts"); McCullough ex rel. Jordan, 760 F. Supp. at 616 (because of administrative machinery, domestic cases are "peculiarly suited to state regulation and control").

230 See, e.g., Fernos-Lopez, 929 F.2d at 22 (praising "the relative expertise of state courts"); Vaughan, 883 F.2d at 65 (the states "have developed an expertise in settling family disputes");
to control by the federal courts.\textsuperscript{231} Moreover, district courts disavowing jurisdiction caution that federal adjudication raises the danger of conflicting federal and state decrees.\textsuperscript{232}

The reasoning of courts averring special state interest in domestic relations is flawed in a number of respects. First, it rests on the notion that "neither the Constitution nor laws of the United States [are] seen as affecting the family unit."\textsuperscript{233} This view cannot be countenanced in light of the reality of federal law's involvement with the family. Indeed, "a complex mosaic of federal regulation of economic and social relations now overlays state laws" of domestic relations.\textsuperscript{234} To be convinced of this assertion, one need only view the plethora of federal legislation\textsuperscript{235} and constitutional litigation\textsuperscript{236} that affects members of the familial unit and their respective rights.

Next, to the extent that special state interest extends to domestic relations cases, this interest exists only for primary and secondary core

\textsuperscript{231} Firestone v. Cleveland Trust Co., 654 F.2d 1212, 1215 (6th Cir. 1981); see also Vaughan, 883 F.2d at 65 (adjudicating domestic disputes is "a task for which the federal courts are not suited"); Lloyd, 694 F.2d at 493 ("the federal courts are not, as a matter of fact, competent tribunals to handle" domestic relations cases); Donnelly, 515 F.2d at 130 ("the federal court is ill equipped to determine family obligations").

\textsuperscript{232} See, e.g., Femos-Lopez, 929 F.2d at 22 (fearing "the undesirability of potentially incompatibility federal and state decrees in this area"); Vaughan, 883 F.2d at 65 ("federal adjudication of such disputes increases the chances of incompatible or duplicative federal and state court decrees"); Rykers, 892 F.2d at 899-900 ("piecemeal adjudication of such disputes increases the chance of different court systems handing down incompatible decrees"); Ruffalo ex rel. Ruffalo, 702 F.2d at 717 (cautioning against "the possibility of incompatible federal and state court decrees"); Tuerffs, 117 F.R.D. at 675 ("the possibility of conflicting federal and state court decrees preclude this court from assuming jurisdiction").

\textsuperscript{233} Flood v. Braaten, 727 F.2d 303, 307 n.17 (3d Cir. 1984).

\textsuperscript{234} Remnik, supra note 10, at 1750.


\textsuperscript{236} See, e.g., Orr v. Orr 440 U.S. 268, 274–94 (1979) (ruling that gender-specific alimony statute was unconstitutional); Zablocki v. Redhail, 434 U.S. 374, 380 (1978) (holding unconstitutional a state statute that restricted people with child support obligations from marrying); Loving
cases that comprise the state regulation abstained from under *Ankenbrandt*, i.e., the granting of divorce, alimony or custody decrees. Beyond core issues, unless a case raises a difficult issue of unresolved state law—also abstained from under *Ankenbrandt*—it cannot be distinguished from other areas concurrently adjudicated by federal and state courts. Additionally, if state expertise exists in non-primary core matters, it is only because federal courts have not been given the opportunity to hear such cases. At the same time, because "federal courts have acquired a considerable expertise in the interpretation and application of federal law," it can be argued that a concurrent federal expertise exists over certain domestic cases.

Finally, after *Guaranty Trust Co. v. York*,

[i]n all cases where a federal court is exercising jurisdiction solely because of the diversity of citizenship of the parties, the outcome of the litigation in the federal court should be substantially the same, so far as legal rules determine the outcome of a litigation, as it would be if tried in a State court. Thus, federal judges should apply state domestic law in as uniform a manner as state judges, while also ensuring the preservation of a uniform state system of regulation.

2. Bias Against Hearing "Family Law" Matters

Also underlying federal court reluctance to adjudicate domestic relations matters is a bias against "family law" issues, which are often perceived as being "beneath" the proper scope of federal considera-


239 Professor Barbara Wand first made the assertion that federal courts have a "distaste" for
tion. For example, federal courts that have declined jurisdiction over domestic relations matters have described them as "vexatious," "little family quarrel[s]," "intra-family feuds," and "imbroglio[s]" that "embroil" and "enmesh" the courts in cases that require their delving into "sordid evidence" and "trading in wares from the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." Indeed, at least one judge has openly acknowledged that domestic relations cases are "particularly distasteful," and that "exploring a thicket of state decisional law" is a "waste" of time of which federal courts should allow state courts the "dubious honor exclusively."

In her study of the interrelationship between women and federal courts and the role that gender plays in allocating work between the state and federal court systems, Professor Judith domestic matters in 1985. See Barbara Freedman Wand, A Call for the Repudiation of the Domestic Relations Exception to Federal Jurisdiction, 30 Vill. L. Rev. 307, 389-86 (1985).

240 Federal judicial elitism extends beyond the realm of family law. See, e.g., Robert Bork, Dealing with the Overload in Article III Courts, 70 F.R.D. 231, 238-39 (1976) (addressing the National Conference of Causes of Popular Dissatisfaction with Administration of Justice, Pound Conference) ("someone far less qualified than a judge" can adjudicate cases about social security, food stamps, federal employers' liability, consumer products, and other federal legislation).


244 Overman v. United States, 563 F.2d 1287, 1292 (8th Cir. 1977).

245 Lamonagne v. Lamonagne, 394 F. Supp. 1159, 1161 (1975) (quoting Hemstadt v. Hemstadt, 373 F.2d 316, 318 (2d Cir. 1967)).

246 LaMontagne v. LaMontagne, 394 F. Supp. 316, 318 (2d Cir. 1967).


248 See id. at 1087-88; see also Anwood, supra note 25, at 627 ("The domestic relations exception ... saves the courts from a distasteful category of litigation.").


250 Thrower, 425 F. Supp. at 573. Unfortunately, state courts are as likely to be prejudiced against women as are their federal counterparts. As reported by the New York Task Force on Women in the Courts:

[G]ender bias against women ... is a pervasive problem with grave consequences. ... Cultural stereotypes of women's role in marriage and in society daily distort courts' application of substantive law. Women uniquely, disproportionately and with unacceptable frequency must endure a climate of condescension, indifference and hostility.


251 See generally Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History 2 (1988) ("G[ender] ... means knowledge about sexual difference ... produced by cultures and societies of human relationships . . . ."); Barrie Thorne et al., Language, Gender, and Society: Opening a Second Decade of Research, in Language, Gender and Society 7, 12-15 (1983) ("gender is not a unitary, or 'natural' fact, but takes shape in concrete, historically changing social
Resnik posits that underlying federal court disinterest is the association of family law with "private" state controlled law and a corresponding association of federal courts with "public" law such as commerce, constitutional law, and federal statutory enforcement. The assumption that federal courts perform duties central to the nation and thus beyond the realm of local family law "reiterates the marginalization of the lives and work of [family issues] in national culture." It also bears noting that the indifference of the federal courts to domestic relations is reflected by the almost complete absence of the topic from casebooks compiled by federal court commentators.

Bias of federal court judges against domestic relations cases does not provide a valid reason for excising these cases from federal pur-

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\[\ldots\text{relationships}]); Christine A. Littleton, Does It Still Make Sense to Talk About "Women"?, 1 UCLA Women's L.J. 15 (1991) (pointing out some of the shortcomings of gender-neutral language).

253 See generally Resnik, supra note 10, passim. Much of what follows in this Section is derived from Professor Resnik's excellent work and is indebted to her insight.

254 See id. at 1749, 1696.

255 Id. at 1669. Professor Resnik's assertion is borne out not only in the cases cited above, but also in her description of the attempts to enact the Violence Against Women Act, S. 15, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. (1991). Although the Act was enacted after Professor Resnik's article was published, the points she makes are still pertinent. In 1991, Congress reviewed legislation intended to respond to the "national tragedy" that makes women the victims of violence in homes, workplaces, and on the street. See Sen. Comm. on the Judiciary, THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT OF 1991, S. REP. No. 197, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. 39 (1991). The Act contained two jurisdictional provisions that would have conferred federal court review. The first provided federal civil rights remedies to any person who was victimized by a "crime of violence, motivated by gender." See S. 15 at § 301. The second made it a federal crime to travel interstate "to injure, harass, or intimidate a spouse or intimate partner." See id. at § 2261. The Judicial Conference of the United States opposed enactment of the civil rights provisions of the Act, because it felt that conferring federal jurisdiction would "embroil the federal courts in domestic relations disputes" and "flood [federal courts] with cases that have been traditionally within the province of the state courts." REPORT OF THE JUDICIAL CONFERENCE ACT AD HOC COMMITTEE ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE 1, 7 (1991). The Chief Justice also opposed the Act and recommended that Congress heed the Judicial Conference's advice so that limited federal court time and resources could be "reserved for issues where important national interests predominate." William H. Rehnquist, Chief Justice's 1991 Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary, 24 THE THIRD BRANCH 1, 2 (1992).

Although I tend to agree with Professor Resnik, one could argue the opposite position with much confidence, i.e., that the general tendency to "federalize" local crimes, which are essentially local activities, removes from the states an area over which they should retain exclusive authority. Such an assertion would allow federal financial or technological assistance when necessary but prevent the federal courts from being transformed into police courts, as they already have in the drug area.

The integrity of the judicial system is called into question if judges may state, when presented with domestic matters, simply that they have more important matters to consider. Moreover, any federal bias is at least mirrored if not magnified at the state court level so that excising domestic cases from federal review will not abrogate prejudice. Also, traditional reasons for federal court adjudication support diversity jurisdiction. In addition to notions of comity and federalism set forth below, the protection of out-of-state litigants from local bias bolsters the need for federal adjudication.

Two venerable commentators have questioned the extent of prejudice against out-of-state litigants both at the time of the adoption of the Constitution as well as in modern times. Specifically, Judge Henry Friendly argues that protecting creditors from pro-debtor state courts was an equally strong incentive for the adoption of diversity jurisdiction.

past and present. The federal judiciary and its commentators must reclaim the history heretofore denied about the ongoing relations of the federal courts with family life.

Resnik, supra note 10, at 1767.

257 See, e.g., Judicial Council Advisory Committee on Gender Bias in the Courts, Achieving Equal Justice for Women and Men in the Courts, Draft Report, § 4, at 55 (1990) ("Judges rate the family law assignment as their lowest preference by a wide margin . . . ."); Report of the Florida Supreme Court Gender Bias Study Commission 77 (1990) (reporting judges' strong "dislike" of family law assignments); see also Maryland Special Joint Committee, Gender Bias in the Courts (1989) (recognizing that domestic relations law experience was less useful for becoming a judge than was jury trial and criminal prosecution experience); Report of the Connecticut Task Force, Gender, Justice and the Courts 39 (1991) ("Some attorneys felt that because women attorneys . . . practiced juvenile or domestic law," they were less likely to be selected by Judicial Selection Commission for judgeships).

258 See Resnik, supra note 10, at 1761 ("Today's 'buzz' word 'diversity' may have special meaning within debates about the breadth and role of 'diversity jurisdiction' in that excluding cases in which domestic relations issues are raised is a way to make 'diversity jurisdiction' less 'diverse'.").


261 See Currie, supra note 256, at 7; Larry Kramer, Diversity Jurisdiction, 1990 B.Y.U. L. Rev. 97, 119-21 (1990) (concluding that the classic contention that diversity counterbalanced local bias is exaggerated).
jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{262} Professor David Currie asserts that geographical prejudice has been replaced by more pertinent prejudices.\textsuperscript{263}

Nevertheless, fear of local prejudice remains a real concern in domestic cases.\textsuperscript{264} As observed by the Third Circuit:

[D]omestic relations] cases truly represent one of the contemporary essential functions of the diversity grant. Here the specter of local bias, a matter of some conjecture in 1787 and of presumptive dubiety now, surfaces with unfortunate frequency. . . . [T]hey relate to the interstate arbitral function for which the federal courts are well suited.\textsuperscript{265}

The necessary enactment of uniform nationwide laws such as the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act\textsuperscript{266} and the Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act\textsuperscript{267} ("PKPA") prove the Third Circuit's allegations of bias. In \textit{Thompson v. Thompson} the Supreme Court appeared to recognize the bias potentially inherent in domestic relations cases.\textsuperscript{268} The Court noted that jurisdictional deadlocks among states in child custody cases as well as a nationwide problem of parental kidnapping underlay a congressional aim in PKPA of extending the requirements of the Full Faith and Credit Clause to custody determinations.\textsuperscript{269} Ironically, the Court in \textit{Thompson}, which addressed a contentious inter-circuit conflict, held that PKPA did not confer jurisdiction upon the federal district courts to arbitrate between conflicting state decrees.\textsuperscript{270} Such a ruling calls into question the usefulness of PKPA, as well as the federal practice of not enforcing decrees.\textsuperscript{271}

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{262} See \textit{Friendly, Diversity Jurisdiction, supra} note 260, at 495–97.
\item \textsuperscript{263} See \textit{Currie, supra} note 256, at 7.
\item \textsuperscript{265} DiRuggiero v. Rodgers, 743 F.2d 1009, 1019 (3d Cir. 1984).
\item \textsuperscript{267} \textit{28 U.S.C. §§ 1901–1963 (1988).}
\item \textsuperscript{268} \textit{48 U.S. 174 (1988).}
\item \textsuperscript{269} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{270} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{271} See \textit{Chemerinsky \& Kramer, supra} note 259, at 81–83 (noting that one of the more important functions of the federal courts is to serve as an umpire in interstate disputes).}
\end{itemize}}
Two examples will suffice to illustrate the contention that out-of-state claimants are the targets of bias. In *Allen v. Allen*,272 a husband brought suit against his wife in state court for breach of a postnuptial property settlement agreement. Because of the husband’s position as a member of the bar association of the county where the state court action was initiated, the wife sought to remove the action to federal court. Despite the wife’s apprehension over local bias, the federal court dismissed the case under the domestic relations exception.273 Similarly, in *Bennett v. Bennett*,274 a divorced father brought an action against his former wife seeking monetary damages and injunctive relief as a result of the former wife’s alleged kidnapping of the parties’ child. Preceding the federal suit were no less than three occasions in which state courts refused to enforce or declared void pre-existing custody decrees. Nevertheless, the district court held that although it could award damages, it could not grant injunctive relief.275

3. Federal Court Congestion

Finally, it is beyond dispute that the federal court workload is heavy and becoming increasingly more so at a rapid pace.276 Practically all federal judges agree that their dockets are overcrowded.277 Some suggested methods to reduce the burden on federal judges include expanding the federal judiciary,278 raising the minimum amount in

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273 Id.
274 682 F.2d 1039 (D.C. Cir. 1982).
275 Id.
277 Chemerinsky & Kramer, supra note 259; see also Patricia Wald, *Some Thoughts on Judging as Gleaned from One Hundred Years of the Harvard Law Review and Other Great Books*, 100 HARY. L. REV. 887 (1987) (“American judges think of themselves as continuously besieged.”).
278 Larry Kramer (Reporter), *A Minimal Model and Some Priorities for Federal Jurisdiction*, in 1 FEDERAL COURTS STUDY COMMITTEE, WORKING PAPERS AND SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS 134 (July 1, 1989) (Committee’s “controversial argument” of “disfavoring increasing the number of judges in the future as a long-term solution in favor of reducing the number of cases allowed in federal court”).
controversy requirement, eradicating diversity jurisdiction, or limiting the types of actions entitled to be brought in or removed to

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The desirability of diversity jurisdiction is the focus of an on-going federal courts debate. In 1968, the American Law Institute ("ALI") proposed excepting domestic relations cases from federal court review by amending the diversity statute. The proposal was abandoned when ALI's members were unable to agree on what other areas should also be specifically excepted. See American Law Institute, Study of the Division of Jurisdiction Between State and Federal Courts § 1330 (Tent. Draft No. 6, 1968). Because most domestic relations cases are grounded in diversity jurisdiction, see supra note 7, ALI's proposal would have precluded federal court review of the majority of non-primary core actions. Most recently, Professor Larry Kramer conducted a study of diversity jurisdiction as reporter for the Subcommittee on the Role of the Federal Courts and Their Relations to the States of the Federal Courts Study Committee. Professor Kramer concluded that "abolishing or curtailing diversity jurisdiction should be among the first steps Congress takes to alleviate workload problems." See Kramer, supra note 261, at 99; see also Robert C. Brown, The Jurisdiction of the Federal Courts Based on Diversity of Citizenship, 78 U. Pa. L. Rev. 179 (1929); Frank, supra note 259, at 403; John J. Parker, Dual Sovereignty and the Federal Courts, 51 Nw. U. L. Rev. 407 (1956); Thomas D. Rowe, Jr., Abolishing Diversity Jurisdiction: Positive Side Effects and Potential for Further Reforms, 92 Harv. L. Rev. 963 (1979); Robert J. Sheran & Barbara Isaacman, State Cases Belong in State Courts, 12 Creighton L. Rev. 1 (1978); Charles Alan Wright, The Federal Courts and the Nature and Quality of State Law, 13 Wayne L. Rev. 317 (1967). For the opinions of one federal judge confronted with diversity cases, see Dolores K. Stover, A Federal Judge Views Diversity Jurisdiction Through the Lens of Federalism, 78 Va. L. Rev. 1671 (1992).


federal court. These options, beset with their own difficulties, depend in the first instance upon congressional action, consideration of which is beyond the scope of this Article.

An alternative within judicial control is reducing the number of cases under federal review or, as Judge Friendly expresses it, finding a way to "avert the flood by lessening the flow." Accordingly, several courts have justified a general domestic relations exception in order to pare down their dockets. For example, in Cherry v.

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286 See, e.g., Vaughan v. Smithson, 882 F.2d 65, 65 (10th Cir. 1989) (observing that domestic disputes "crowd the federal court docket"); Kirby v. Mellenger, 830 F.2d 176 (11th Cir. 1987) (bemoaning "the problem of congested dockets in federal courts"); Rykers v. Alford, 832 F.2d 895, 899-900 (5th Cir. 1987) (lamenting that "such cases serve no particular federal interest, while crowding the federal court docket"); Ruffalo ex rel. Ruffalo v. Civiletti, 702 F.2d 710, 717 (8th Cir. 1983) (ruining "the problem of congested dockets in federal courts"); see also Congleton v. Holy Cross Child Placement Agency, Inc., 919 F.2d 1077, 1079 (5th Cir. 1990); Ingram v. Hayes,
Cherry, the District of Maryland declined jurisdiction over a case because it was “unwilling to increase the workload of this already overburdened Court.”

However sympathetic the plight of overburdened district court judges, federal court congestion does not justify refusing jurisdiction. To begin with, the number of domestic cases in federal court is now limited by the requirements of the diversity and federal question statutes. Moreover, those cases not culled from the docket by Ankenbrandt abstention are really contract, tort, and constitutional cases. Allowing district court judges to pick and choose cases because they are unattractive to their individual dockets would lend itself to abuse. More importantly, absent a principled exception such as abstention, institutional integrity requires federal courts to hear cases within their purview.


important things to do directly contravenes the congressional grant of authority under the diversity statute.292

This idea has been specifically endorsed by the Supreme Court. In Thermtron Products, Inc. v. Hermansdorfer,293 the Court held that federal courts may not dismiss cases properly filed in or removed to federal court "because the district court considers itself too busy to try" the matter.294 Similarly, in Meredith v. Winter Haven,295 the Court held that when federal jurisdiction is properly invoked, federal courts have a duty to decide those issues of state law necessary to render a judgment unless a recognized public policy or defined principle guiding the exercise of jurisdiction dictates, in an exceptional case, federal court abstention.296 It is precisely because picking and choosing among cases lacks a "defined principle" to guide the exercise of jurisdiction, that federal court congestion does not justify refusal to hear domestically related cases.

Central to federal courts jurisprudence is the question of the respective roles of federal and state courts.297 Because these court systems have concurrent or overlapping jurisdiction,298 the allocation of power between them is the focus of much federal courts jurisprudence. At the heart of this analysis299 reside the related and often

292 Shapiro, Jurisdiction and Discretion, supra note 126, at 587; see also Atwood, supra note 25, at 599 ("If the federal courts were allowed to choose among cases statutorily assigned to their jurisdiction on the basis of subjective appeal, Congress' constitutional role in establishing the jurisdiction of the lower federal courts would be abrogated."); Note, Domestic Relations, supra note 24, at 638 ("It is questionable whether federal abstention can properly be invoked merely for administrative convenience to deprive otherwise qualified litigants of an alternative forum to which they are constitutionally and statutorily entitled.").


294 Id. at 344; see also American Law Institute, Study of the Division of Jurisdiction Between State and Federal Courts 49 (1969) (proposal to codify the abstention doctrine excluded federal court congestion from the conditions justifying abstention).

295 320 U.S. 228 (1943).


297 See generally Cover, supra note 9, at 640 (discussing the possibilities of "vertical" (state-federal) and "horizontal" (state-state) jurisdiction).

298 Shapiro, Jurisdiction and Discretion, supra note 126, at 581 ("Federalism and comity concerns have been critical to the exercise of discretion in the federal courts and should remain so.").
indistinguishable notions of federalism and comity. Professor Shapiro notes that the terms federalism and comity overlap in that both convey the need for respect between two entities—the state and federal governments—that are to some degree independent of each other.

In practice, federalism and comity influence the way in which we arrange our dual system so that each conducts business central to its interests while still being respectful of the interests of the other. Nor is there an absolute answer as to where those lines should be drawn;

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301 Professor Wells argues that the Court's comity opinions fail to delineate when comity is to apply as a general principle. This is because the Court uses a vague description of comity to shield its seemingly arbitrary decisions. See Michael Wells, The Role of Comity in the Law of Federal Courts, 60 N.C. L. Rev. 59 (1981); see also Shirley M. Hufstedler, Comity and the Constitution: The Changing Role of the Federal Judiciary, 47 N.Y.U. L. Rev. 841 (1972); Larry Yntema, The Comity Doctrine, 65 Mich. L. Rev. 9 (1966); Note, "The New Federal Comity" Pursuit of Younger Ideas In a Civil Context, 61 Iowa L. Rev. 784 (1976). Similarly, Mr. Rehnquist contends that comity "is a toothless abstraction, not a rule, invoked in an infinite variety of contexts to justify one governmental body's deference to another." See Rehnquist, supra note 137, at 1066–67.

302 Shapiro, Jurisdiction and Discretion, supra note 126, at 583. Two other well known and accurate explanations are worth quoting at length. Judge Carl McGowan said that:

Federalism means many things to many people. In its broadest common meaning, however, it refers to the relations between the states and the general government under our political system. These relations have involved a dual aspect. First, federalism has meant the desirability and necessity of the general government deferring to the states in order to allow them their proper role over issues of state and local concern. But the other side of federalism is the desirability and necessity of the state governments' deferring to the general government in issues of national concern.

McGowan, supra note 300, at 1431. In Younger, the Court defined "comity" as:

a proper respect for state functions, recognition of the fact that the entire country is made up of a Union of separate state governments, and a continuance of the belief that the National Government will fare best if the States and their institutions are left free to perform their separate functions in their separate ways.


I agree with Professor Shapiro and other commentators that federalism and comity often overlap and are at times indistinguishable. Consequently, I have linked these concepts. It should be noted, however, that not all federal courts scholars so freely blur the distinction between federalism and comity. For example, Dean Aviam Soifer and Professor H.C. Macgill argue eloquently in their seminal article that the two terms embody different notions of how federal and state courts have historically related to each other. Thus, according to their understanding, comity embodies deference, while federalism embraces uniformity of federal rights. See Soifer & Macgill, supra note 124 at 1188–91.
in fact, different judicial systems have reached different accommoda-
tions of the national and local judicial systems. For example, Professor
Martha Field notes that in Canada, as opposed to the United States,
the central government controls marriage and divorce while the pro-
vincial governments jealously guard their control over labor law.303

Where we choose to draw jurisdictional lines is based on perspec-
tive and theory. For example, Judge Richard Posner’s theory of fed­
eralism uses the economic analysis of “optimal allocations” to determine
federal/state jurisdictional boundaries.304 In contrast to Judge Posner’s
economic approach, Professors Erwin Chemerinsky and Larry Kramer
begin with certain “value choices” that correspond with functions that
the federal government attempts to perform through its litigation
agenda.305 Similarly, Professor Redish offers a list of normative aspira-
tions for which federal courts should strive.306 Professor Wells believes
that “the most important issue” in jurisdictional allocation is “whether
the state’s interest in sustaining its regulation or the individual’s inter­
est in constitutional constraints on state power should receive the
litigating edge.”307 Professor Fallon characterizes the traditionally op­
posite approaches to the assertion of power by federal courts over state
courts as an ideological struggle between the advocates of “Federalist”
and “Nationalist” theories.308

The vision of our system offered in this Article requires federal
courts to hear cases within their jurisdiction unless a principled and

303 Field, supra note 300, at 108.
304 Posner, supra note 300, at 172. In his analysis, Judge Posner uses terms “costs,” “benefits”
and “externalities” to draw jurisdictional lines. For example, he assumes that judges “act in
accordance with their rational self-interest” and that that interest differs from federal to state.
State court judges are dependant on popular approval and so more sensitive to claims by in-state
residents. Federal judges who have life tenure are more likely to vindicate rights of people who
are locally prejudiced. See id.
305 See Chemerinsky & Kramer, supra note 259, at 77. The six major functions that are
identified are: “Enforcing the United States Constitution;” “Protecting the interests of the federal
government as a sovereign;” “Serving as an umpire in interstate disputes;” “Assuring uniform
interpretation and application of federal law;” “Developing federal common law;” “Hearing
appeals.” Id.
306 See Redish, Martian Chronicles, supra note 114. Professor Redish’s factors are: “intersys­
temic cross-pollination, systemic representativeness, litigant choice, litigation efficiency, funda­
mental fairness, institutionalism, and logical consistency.” Id. at 1770 (citations omitted).
307 Wells, supra note 124, at 612.
308 See Fallon, supra note 297, at 1143-46. Under the Federalist model, “states emerge as sov­
ereign entities against which federal courts should exercise only limited powers, and state
courts, which are presumed to be as fair and competent as federal courts, stand as the ultimate
 guarantors of constitutional rights.” Id. at 1143-44 (citations omitted). By contrast, the Nationalist
model posits that “state sovereignty interests must yield to the vindication of federal rights and
that, because state courts should not be presumed as competent as federal courts to enforce
constitutional liberties, rights to have federal issues adjudicated in a federal forum should be
well defined exception supports abstention. One such exclusion would be a well marked area of state expertise and interest, such as secondary core cases. Another exemption would be cases in any category that raise difficult questions of unresolved state law. Declining to hear these cases would be a matter of systemic courtesy, not a reflection on judicial competence.

B. Domestic Federal Question Cases

Federal courts have restricted their proffered policy reasons for not hearing domestic relations cases to those arising under diversity jurisdiction, because of the commonly held view that constitutional issues were prohibited on jurisdictional rather than jurisprudential grounds. Nevertheless, I wish to assert that allowing federal courts to adjudicate domestic federal questions has the added benefit of protecting federal rights. Federal courts will more likely vindicate federal rights and so dispense a "juster justice," and, therefore, "parties with federal questions belong in federal court." Implicit in this assertion is the proposition that federal courts are superior to state courts as guardians of constitutional rights. This is certainly not an uncontroversial proposition, and in fact lies at the center of a federal courts debate over parity.

construed broadly." Id. at 1145 (citation omitted). According to Professor Fallon, Federalist jurists include Chief Justices Rehnquist and Burger and Justices Harlan, Frankfurter and Powell, while Nationalist jurists include Justices Brennan and Marshall and Judge Julius Smith Gibbons. See id. at 1146.

309 But see supra, note 6.

310 Henry M. Hart, Jr., The Relations Between State and Federal Law, 54 COLUM. L. REV. 489, 513 (1954); see also FRIENDLY, FEDERAL JURISDICTION, supra note 260, at 12.

311 Meltzer, supra note 99, at 431; see also England v. Louisiana State Bd. of Medical Examiners, 375 U.S. 411, 416 (1964) ("Limiting the litigant to review here would deny him the benefit of a federal trial court's role in constructing a record and making fact findings. How the facts are found will often dictate the decision of federal claims.").

In addition to the reasons set forth above, scholars have extrapolated various justifications for future federal review of certain domestic relations cases. For example, Professor Akhil Amar has argued with his usual acumen following the Supreme Court decision in Deshaney that allegations of child abuse should be construed as thirteenth amendment violations because of the indicia of slavery involved in the power structure of the parent-child relationship. See Akhil R. Amar & Daniel Wiklinsky, Child Abuse as Slavery: A Thirteenth Amendment Response to Deshaney, 105 HARV. L. REV. 1359, 1372 (1992). Although not intended as the direct consequence of his assertion, Professor Amar is averring in part that some secondary domestic cases call into play federal questions and therefore merit federal court review. See id.

312 How one sides in this debate is dependant on perspective. I am persuaded by the federal superiority arguments, but this is because of my experiences litigating in both federal and state courts. Of course, such an assertion, while empirical, is purely anecdotal.
Federal courts scholars have asserted the superiority of federal courts to state courts on both theoretical and practical grounds. Professor Redish, for example, has averred that "the arguments that federal courts are superior are overwhelming." Those arguments include the shifted balance of power between federal and state courts during Reconstruction, the subsequent increase in federal expertise, and the lack of structural independence of the state judiciaries. Professor Burt Neuborne argues that, beyond theoretical considerations, state and federal courts lack parity. To support this contention, he offers a number of reasons why federal courts are more sympathetic to constitutional claimants. These factors include greater technical competence, the "psychological set" of the court, and insulation from majoritarian pressures.

Claims of federal superiority do not go unchallenged. Professor Paul Bator, for example, is a very outspoken critic of these assumptions. Professor Bator argues that allowing state court judges to hear constitutional claims helps "to assure optimal performance by the state courts" while, conversely, directing constitutional claims to federal courts evinces "a narrow and partisan vision of what constitutional values are." At the same time, Professor Althouse argues the existence of a strong federal interest in allowing states to adjudicate federal issues, and that this interest should govern the allotment of jurisdiction.

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313 See Redish, Separation of Powers, supra note 114, at 73.
314 The thesis is worth quoting at length:
   The dramatic changes in the philosophy of federalism, culminating in the Civil War and enactment of the post-Civil War constitutional amendments and statutes limiting state power to interfere with federal rights, dictated a corresponding shift in the balance of judicial power between state and federal courts. . . . Since that time federal courts have developed a vast expertise in dealing with the intricacies of federal law, while the state judiciary has, quite naturally, devoted the bulk of its efforts to the evolution and refinement of state law and policy.

Redish, supra note 147, at 2–3.

315 See Redish, supra note 284, at 161–66; see also Redish, Younger Deference, supra note 114 (federal courts are superior protectors of federal rights); Martin H. Redish, Judicial Parity, Litigant Choice, and Democratic Theory: A Comment on Federal Jurisdiction and Constitutional Rights, 36 UCLA L. Rev. 329 (1988) (same); Amar, supra note 84 (arguing that the superiority of federal judges is advanced by the text of Article III); Amar, supra note 124 (same).

317 See id. at 1118–28.
318 See Bator, supra note 300.
319 Id. at 625–35; see also Michael E. Solimine & James L. Walker, Constitutional Litigation in Federal and State Courts: An Empirical Analysis of Judicial Parity, 10 Hastings Const. L.Q. 213 (1983) (finding that state courts are as likely as federal courts to uphold constitutional rights).
320 See generally Althouse, Misguided Search, supra note 144; Althouse, Separate Sphere, supra
Professor Chemerinsky suggests an alternative rationale to federal superiority for federal court disposition of domestic federal question cases.\textsuperscript{321} Professor Chemerinsky argues that the debate over parity cannot be resolved, because such a determination ultimately depends upon a nonexistent standard by which to compare empirically the competing judicial systems.\textsuperscript{322} Because he finds it "desirable to define a role for the federal courts without evaluating the comparative abilities of the federal and state courts,"\textsuperscript{323} he "proposes that litigants with federal constitutional claims should generally be able to choose the forum, federal or state, in which to resolve their disputes."\textsuperscript{324} Professor Chemerinsky demonstrates that allowing litigant choice maximizes the opportunity to protect individual rights, enhances litigants' autonomy, and enhances federalism.\textsuperscript{325} Using this standard also avoids a choice between competing notions of parity, because allowing the litigants to choose their own venues negates a value judgment by commentators.

\section*{IV. Conclusion}

In this Article, I have examined the skewed development of the domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction from \textit{Barber v. Barber} to the contemporary decision of \textit{Ankenbrandt v. Richards}. Although definitive Supreme Court resolution of the conflicts in this area must await another day, this Article has shown that following \textit{Ankenbrandt}, federal court jurisdiction exists over all non-primary core actions properly arising under either the diversity or federal question jurisdiction statutes. This Article then addressed the issue of whether the existence of jurisdiction compelled federal court adjudication of all domestic related disputes within their purview, or instead permitted abstention. This Article asserted the propriety of abstention principles and proposed a new form of abstention whose application would exclude from federal consideration primary core cases and suits raising


\textsuperscript{322}Erwin Chemerinsky, \textit{Ending the Parity Debate}, 71 B.U. L. Rev. 595 (1991); see also Chemerinsky & Kramer, \textit{supra} note 259, at 79 ("The parity debate is ultimately unresolvable because parity is an empirical question and we lack a meaningful standard by which to judge decisions in competing judicial systems."); Michael Wells, \textit{Is Disparity a Problem?}, 22 Ga. L. Rev. 283 (1988) (asserting that focusing on parity merely obfuscates substantive issues); Wells, \textit{supra} note 124 (parity unresolvable). \textit{But see} Solimine & Walker, \textit{supra} note 519 (submitting an empirical study).

\textsuperscript{324}Chemerinsky, \textit{supra} note 321, at 236.

\textsuperscript{325}\textit{Id.} at 302-10.
difficult issues of unresolved state law. It then evaluated the competing policy concerns informing a federal court's decision whether or not to exert jurisdiction over non-primary core actions, concluding that prudential considerations support the jurisdictional lines drawn in the proposed *Ankenbrandt* abstention doctrine.