

[Article: The Surprising Virtues of Treating Trade Secrets as IP Rights](#)

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* William H. Neukom Professor, Stanford Law School; of counsel, Keker & Van Nest LLP. © 2008 Mark A. Lemley and the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. Thanks to Chuck Adams, John Barton, Bob Bone, Dick Craswell, Zohar Efroni, Paul Goldstein, Wendy Gordon, Tait Graves, Joe Grundfest, Rose Hagan, Eran Kahana, Larry Lessig, David Levine, Jacqueline Lipton, Rob Merges, Mike Meurer, Roger Milgrim, Michael Risch, Sharon Sandeen, Peter Swire, Rebecca Tushnet, and participants in workshops at Stanford Law School and the IP Scholars' Conference for discussions of these issues or comments on a prior draft. This Article does not address perhaps the most divisive issue facing the law of trade secrecy: whether it is "trade secret law" (5983 cites in Westlaw's "allcases" and "tp-all" databases combined) or "trade secrets law" (a mere 2144 cites). Westlaw search conducted February 15, 2008. I use "trade secret" throughout - who am I to argue with 73.6 percent of all courts and commentators? - but that doesn't mean I'm taking a definitive position on the issue.

Text

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Introduction

Trade secret law is a puzzle. Courts and scholars have struggled for over a century to figure out why we protect trade secrets. The puzzle is not in understanding what trade secret law covers; there seems to be widespread agreement on the basic contours of the law. Nor is the problem that people object to the effects of the law. While scholars periodically disagree over the purposes of the law, and have for

almost a century,¹ they seem to agree that misappropriation of trade secrets is a bad thing that the law should punish. Rather, the puzzle is a theoretical one: no one can seem to agree where trade secret law comes from or how to fit it into the broader framework of legal doctrine. Courts, lawyers, scholars, and treatise writers argue over whether trade secrets are a creature of contract, of tort, of property, or even of criminal law.² None of these different justifications has proven entirely persuasive. Worse, they have contributed to inconsistent treatment of the basic elements of a trade secret cause of action and uncertainty as to the relationship between trade secret laws and other causes of action.³ Robert Bone has gone so far as to **[*313]** suggest that this theoretical incoherence indicates that there is no need for trade secret law as a separate doctrine at all. He reasons that whatever purposes are served by trade secret law can be served just as well by the common law doctrines that underlie it, whichever those turn out to be.⁴

In this Article, I suggest that trade secrets can be justified as a form, not of traditional property, but of intellectual property (IP). The incentive justification for encouraging new inventions is straightforward. Granting legal protection for those new inventions not only encourages their creation, but enables an inventor to sell her idea. And while we have other laws that encourage inventions, notably patent law, trade secrecy offers some significant advantages for inventors over patent protection. It is cheaper and quicker to obtain, since it doesn't require government approval, and

¹ Among the academic treatments of trade secret law and theory, see, for example, Melvin F. Jager, *Trade Secrets Law* (2007); Roger M. Milgrim & Eric E. Bensen, *Milgrim on Trade Secrets* (2008); James Pooley, *Trade Secrets* (2008); William B. Barton, A Study in the Law of Trade Secrets, 13 U. Cin. L. Rev. 507, 558 (1939); Vincent Chiappetta, Myth, Chameleon, or Intellectual Property Olympian? A Normative Framework Supporting Trade Secret Law, [8 Geo. Mason L. Rev. 69 \(1999\)](#); David D. Friedman, William M. Landes & Richard A. Posner, Some Economics of Trade Secret Law, 5 J. Econ. Persp. 61 (1991); Charles Tait Graves, Trade Secrets as Property: Theory and Consequences, [15 J. Intell. Prop. L. 39 \(2007\)](#); James W. Hill, Trade Secrets, Unjust Enrichment, and the Classification of Obligations, [4 Va. J.L. & Tech. 2 \(1999\)](#); Edmund W. Kitch, The Law and Economics of Rights in Valuable Information, 9 J. Legal Stud. 683 (1980); David S. Levine, Secrecy and Unaccountability: Trade Secrets in Our Public Infrastructure, 59 Fla. L. Rev. 135 (2007); Robert P. Merges, The Law and Economics of Employee Inventions, [13 Harv. J.L. & Tech. 1, 12-31 \(1999\)](#); Chris Montville, Reforming the Law of Proprietary Information, [56 Duke L.J. 1159 \(2007\)](#); Christopher Rebel J. Pace, The Case for a Federal Trade Secrets Act, [8 Harv. J.L. & Tech. 427, 435-42 \(1995\)](#); Gale R. Peterson, Trade Secrets in an Information Age, [32 Hous. L. Rev. 385 \(1995\)](#); Michael Risch, Why Do We Have Trade Secrets?, [11 Marq. Intell. Prop. L. Rev. 1 \(2007\)](#); Sharon K. Sandeen, The Cinderella of Intellectual Property Law: Trade Secrets, in 2 *Intellectual Property and Information Wealth* 399 (Peter K. Yu ed., 2007); Jon Chally, Note, The Law of Trade Secrets: Toward a More Efficient Approach, [57 Vand. L. Rev. 1269 \(2004\)](#); Note, Equitable Protection of Trade Secrets, 23 Colum. L. Rev. 164 (1923); Note, Nature of Trade Secrets and Their Protection, 42 Harv. L. Rev. 254 (1928); Note, Protection and Use of Trade Secrets, 64 Harv. L. Rev. 976 (1951); Note, Protection of Information in the Nature of Trade Secrets, 14 Minn. L. Rev. 546 (1930); Michael P. Simpson, Note, The Future of Innovation: Trade Secrets, Property Rights, and Protectionism - An Age-Old Tale, [70 Brook. L. Rev. 1121 \(2005\)](#).

² See *infra* notes 23-62 and accompanying text.

³ Miles J. Feldman, Comment, Toward a Clearer Standard of Protectable Information: Trade Secrets and the Employment Relationship, 9 High Tech. L.J. 151, 161-63 (1994) (arguing that much of the uncertainty in trade secret law can be traced to the disagreement over justifications for trade secret law).

⁴ Robert G. Bone, A New Look at Trade Secret Law: Doctrine in Search of Justification, [86 Cal. L. Rev. 241, 243 \(1998\)](#).

it extends to protection of types of business and process information that likely would not be patentable.

It seems odd, though, for the law to encourage secrets, or to encourage only those inventions that are kept secret. I argue that, paradoxically, trade secret law actually encourages disclosure, not secrecy. Without legal protection, companies in certain industries would invest too much in keeping secrets. Trade secret law develops as a substitute for the physical and contractual restrictions those companies would otherwise impose in an effort to prevent competitors from acquiring their information.

The puzzle then becomes why the law would require secrecy as an element of the cause of action if its goal is to reduce secrecy. I argue that the secrecy requirement serves a channeling function. Only the developers of some kinds of inventions have the option to overinvest in physical secrecy in the absence of legal protection. For products that are inherently self-disclosing (the wheel, say, or the paper clip), trying to keep the idea secret is a lost cause. We don't need trade secret law to encourage disclosure of inherently self-disclosing products - inventors of such products will get patent protection or nothing. But if trade secret law prevented the use of ideas whether or not they were secret, the result would be less, not more, diffusion of valuable information. The secrecy requirement therefore serves a gatekeeper function, ensuring that the law encourages disclosure of information that would otherwise be kept secret, while channeling inventors of self-disclosing products to the patent system.

My argument has a number of implications for trade secret policy. First, the theory works only if we treat trade secrets as IP rights, requiring proof of secrecy as an element of protection. If we give the protection to things that are public, we defeat the purpose and give windfalls to people who may not be inventors (what we might call "trade secret trolls"). Courts that think of trade secret law as a common law tort rather than an IP right are apt to overlook the [*314] secrecy requirement in their zeal to reach "bad actors." But it is the courts that emphasize secrecy, not appropriation, as the key element of the cause of action that have it right. Second, an IP theory of trade secrets also encourages preemption of "unjust enrichment" theories and other common law ways courts are tempted to give private parties legal control over information in the public domain. Thus, an IP theory of trade secrets is in part a "negative" one: the value of trade secret law lies in part in defining the boundaries of the cause of action and preempting others that might reach too far. Analyzing trade secret claims as IP claims rather than common law contract or tort claims requires courts to focus on what the law is protecting, how, and why - something the common law did not do. As a result, the unified trade secret approach

does not expand, but rather cabins, the overbroad reach of the common law.⁵ Understanding trade secrets in this negative way - as imposing a consistent set of standards on claims that would otherwise be based on disparate legal theories and claims of entitlement or free riding - advances the goals of innovation and promotes responsible business conduct without limiting the vigorous competition on which a market economy is based.

Finally, treating trade secrets as IP rights helps secure their place in the pantheon of legal protection for inventions. The traditional conception of the trade-off between patents and trade secrets views the disclosure function of the patent system as one of its great advantages over trade secret law. And indeed the law operates in various ways to encourage inventors to choose patent over trade secret protection where both are possible. But for certain types of inventions we may actually get more useful "disclosure" at less cost from trade secret than from patent law.

In Part I, I review the origins and contours of trade secret law. Part II discusses the various theories of trade secret law, and how they have split courts and commentators. In Part III, I argue that the virtue of treating trade secrets as IP rights is - or at least should be - that it limits business tort claims to circumstances in which there is really a secret to be protected, and therefore compensates for the lack of clear standards in defining what constitutes misappropriation. Finally, in Part IV I discuss the uneven internalization of this lesson in trade secret cases to date, and some of the implications the IP theory of trade secret law has for trade secret doctrine.

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I. Trade Secret Doctrine

A. The History of Trade Secret Law

Trade secret law is a relative latecomer to the IP pantheon. While patent and copyright law were well established in Europe by the founding of the Republic, and trademark law had common law roots in various trade doctrines, trade secret law in its modern form in Anglo-American jurisprudence is a common law creation of the nineteenth century. English and American courts first recognized a cause of action for damages for misappropriation of trade secrets in 1817 and 1837, respectively;⁶

⁵ The conventional complaint is the opposite - that treating trade secrets as IP leads to overly broad protection. See, e.g., Simpson, *supra* note 1, at 1136. As I suggest in this Article, that traditional view is wrong.

⁶ See [*Vickery v. Welch*, 36 Mass. \(19 Pick.\) 523, 527 \(1837\)](#); *Newbery v. James*, (1817) 35 Eng. Rep. 1011, 1013 (Ch.).

injunctive relief against actual or threatened misappropriation came later still.⁷ These early decisions concerned issues that are still debated in trade secret cases today: the circumstances in which an employee may continue her business after departing her employer, the circumstances in which a competitor may copy another's publicly sold product, and whether courts will enforce a contract requiring that business information be kept confidential. While there were forms of trade secret protection on the Continent dating perhaps as far back as Roman times,⁸ modern trade secret law **[*316]** is primarily an Anglo-American doctrine. Indeed, even today trade secret law is not well established outside of common law countries,⁹ notwithstanding treaties that require most countries of the world to implement trade secret protection.¹⁰

The doctrine of trade secrets evolved out of a series of related common law torts: breach of confidence, breach of confidential relationship, common law misappropriation, unfair competition, unjust enrichment, and torts related to trespass or unauthorized access to a plaintiff's property. It also evolved out of a series of legal rules - contract and common law - governing the employment

⁷ See [Taylor v. Blanchard, 95 Mass. \(13 Allen\) 370 \(1866\)](#); *Yovatt v. Winyard*, (1820) 37 Eng. Rep. 425, 426 (Ch.).

⁸ One scholar traces the earliest legal protection against "misappropriation of trade secrets" to the Roman Empire. See A. Arthur Schiller, *Trade Secrets and the Roman Law: The Actio Servi Corrupti*, 30 Colum. L. Rev. 837, 838-39 (1930). The Roman courts created a cause of action called *actio servi corrupti* - literally, an action for corrupting a slave. According to Schiller, the *actio servi corrupti* was used to protect slave owners from third parties who would "corrupt" slaves (by bribery or intimidation) into disclosing their owners' confidential business information. The law made such third parties liable to the slave owner for twice the damages he suffered as a result of the disclosure.

While more recent scholarship has cast some doubt on the enforcement of trade secret protection in the Roman Empire, see Alan Watson, *Trade Secrets and Roman Law: The Myth Exploded*, [11 Tul. Eur. & Civ. L.F. 19, 19 \(1996\)](#), the concept that so-called business or "trade secrets" were entitled to legal protection spread rapidly throughout the world. As early as the Renaissance, most European nation-states had laws that protected businesses (notably, the guild cartels) from those who used their secret processes and ideas without permission. These early laws were translated during the Industrial Revolution into statutes that protected "industrial secrets." Many of these statutes are still in force today, albeit in modified form.

The roots of trade secrecy in slavery law were further evident in the treatment of employees in the centuries before the Industrial Revolution. Both commerce and foreign policy included a strong dose of "mercantilism." Governments and private guilds attempted to keep "their" IP within their grasp, using a combination of rewards to inventors and rules that reduced employee mobility. These developments are tracked in Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, at 90, 190 (2d ed. 1980) and David J. Jeremy, *Transatlantic Industrial Revolution: The Diffusion of Textile Technologies Between Britain and America, 1790-1830s*, at 185-89 (1981). These authors give examples such as restrictive British secrecy laws, rewards to woolen craftsmen in thirteenth-century Bolognese cities, and, on the other hand, the 1660 French kidnapping of skilled Swedish ironworkers. See Robert P. Merges, Peter S. Menell & Mark A. Lemley, *Intellectual Property in the New Technological Age* 34 (rev. 4th ed. 2007).

⁹ Japan has only recently enacted a trade secret protection statute. See Hideo Nakoshi, *New Japanese Trade Secret Act*, 75 J. Pat. & Trademark Off. Soc'y 631 (1993). Nakoshi provides some interesting thoughts on why Japan considered such a trade secret statute unnecessary for so long. He argues that cultural norms of assumed trust made it socially uncomfortable to insist on formal confidentiality agreements, and that long-term or lifetime employment eliminated many trade secret issues associated with employee mobility.

¹⁰ Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPs) art. 39, Apr. 15, 1994, 33 I.L.M. 81.

relationship. In the nineteenth century, courts periodically spoke of trade secrets as property rights, though it is not clear that they meant by that term what we mean today.¹¹ By the early twentieth century, the paradigm had shifted, and misappropriation of trade secrets was treated as a tort based on the confidential relationship between the parties or the misbehavior of the defendant.¹² The standards for trade secret law were collected in the Restatement of Torts in 1939,¹³ and that Restatement was strongly of the view that trade secrets were not property rights but torts based on bad-faith competitive conduct. By the 1980s, a view of trade secrets as based in some combination of contracts and property was on the ascendancy, both in the Supreme Court¹⁴ and in state legislatures, the overwhelming majority of which have adopted the Uniform Trade Secrets Act (UTSA) within the last twenty-five years.¹⁵

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B. The Scope of Trade Secret Law

A trade secret claim can be broken down into three essential elements.¹⁶ First, the subject matter involved must qualify for trade secret protection: it must be the type of knowledge or information that trade secret law was meant to protect, and it must not be generally known to those in the industry. On eligible subject matter, the current trend, exemplified by the UTSA, is to protect any valuable information as a trade secret. So long as the information is capable of adding economic value to the plaintiff, it can be protected by trade secret law. The requirement that the information not be generally known follows from the label "trade secret." The requirement is meant to ensure that no one claims intellectual property protection for information commonly known in a trade or industry.¹⁷

¹¹ On the role of the term "property" in IP rights throughout history, see, for example, Justin Hughes, Copyright and Incomplete Historiographies: Of Piracy, Propertization, and Thomas Jefferson, [79 S. Cal. L. Rev. 993, 1005-08 \(2006\)](#); Adam Mossoff, Who Cares What Thomas Jefferson Thought About Patents? Reevaluating the Patent "Privilege" in Historical Context, [92 Cornell L. Rev. 953, 992-98 \(2007\)](#). But as I note below, "property" in the nineteenth century meant something rather different than most people understand it to mean today, so one must be cautious about drawing meaning from labels.

¹² [E.I. du Pont de Nemours Powder Co. v. Masland, 244 U.S. 100, 102 \(1917\)](#).

¹³ *Restatement of Torts § 757* (1939).

¹⁴ [Ruckelshaus v. Monsanto Co., 467 U.S. 986, 1001-04 \(1984\)](#).

¹⁵ The UTSA, a project of the American Law Institute, codified the common law of trade secrets for the first time.

¹⁶ The first four paragraphs of this Subpart are adapted from Merges et al., *supra* note 8, at 37.

¹⁷ For discussion of the problem of once-secret information disclosed on the Internet, see, for example, Elizabeth A. Rowe, Introducing a Takedown for Trade Secrets on the Internet, [2007 Wis. L. Rev. 1041](#). For an interesting legislative effort to hold back the tide, see [Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 600A.055](#) (West 2007) (defining information released on the Internet as "secret" for purposes of trade secret law if the owner succeeds in getting it removed within a reasonable time).

The second element to be established by the plaintiff in a trade secret case is that the plaintiff, holder of the trade secret, took reasonable precautions under the circumstances to prevent its disclosure. Courts have shown some confusion over the rationale for this requirement. Some see in it evidence that the trade secret is valuable enough to bother litigating; others argue that where reasonable precautions are taken, chances are that a defendant acquired the trade secret wrongfully.¹⁸ Whatever the justification, no one may let information about products and operations flow freely to competitors at one time and then later claim that competitors have wrongfully acquired valuable trade secrets. To establish the right to sue later, one must be reasonably diligent in protecting information. As always, however, the presence of the term "reasonable" ensures close cases and difficult line drawing for courts, and it is clear that only some precautions, not completely effective ones, are required.

Finally, a trade secret plaintiff also must prove that the defendant acquired the information wrongfully - in a word, that the defendant misappropriated the trade secret. Just because a person's information is valuable does not make it wrong for another to use it or disclose it. But use or disclosure is wrong, in the eyes of trade secret law, when the information is acquired through deception, skullduggery, or outright theft. Close cases abound in this area, not simply because of the creativity of competitors in rooting out information about their rivals' businesses and products but because the concept of misappropriation is itself ill-defined.

[*318] In many cases a defendant's use or disclosure is wrongful because of a preexisting obligation to the plaintiff not to disclose or appropriate the trade secret. Such an obligation can arise in either of two ways: explicitly, by contract; or implicitly, because of an implied duty. A classic example of an implied duty is the case of an employee. Even in the absence of an explicit contract, most employees are held to have a duty to protect their employers' interests in the employers' secret practices, information, and the like. Even where the duty arises by explicit contract, however, public policy limitations on the scope and duration of the agreement will often come into play, in some cases resulting in substantial judicial modification of the explicit obligations laid out in the contract.

Trade secret cases come up in three basic sets of circumstances: competitive intelligence, business transactions, and departing employees. The intelligence-gathering cases define rights between strangers, usually competitors, when the defendant engages in some conduct designed to learn of information in the possession of the plaintiff. Some amount of competitive intelligence gathering is

¹⁸ See, e.g., [Rockwell Graphic Sys., Inc. v. DEV Indus., 925 F.2d 174, 178-79 \(7th Cir. 1991\)](#).

permissible, but courts have said that if that activity exceeds some (relatively ill-defined) bounds of commercial morality it is misappropriation of trade secrets. Often those cases will involve violations of some other law. But that is not always true. In *E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. v. Christopher*, for example, the court held that the defendant misappropriated secrets by taking aerial photographs of the plaintiff's chemical engineering plant while it was under construction.¹⁹ There was no law preventing the Christophers from flying where they were, or taking pictures, but in the court's view it was a "school boy's trick" that trade secret law should not permit.²⁰ Not surprisingly, the genesis of these cases is in tort (and, to a lesser extent, criminal) law, which traditionally governs relations between strangers.

The business-transaction and departing-employee cases, by contrast, involve parties who have been in a business relationship, or at least a negotiation towards a business relationship. As a result, the trade secret rules in these cases tend to derive from contract law. Sometimes this is express: the question the court considers is whether negotiating parties signed a nondisclosure agreement, or whether an employee signed an employment agreement restricting the use or disclosure of trade secrets. In other cases, courts are willing to imply restrictions on the use of confidential information created or disclosed in such a relationship even in the absence of a contract. In *Smith v. Dravo Corp.*, for example, the court implied a confidentiality restriction when the plaintiff disclosed confidential information to the [*319] defendant, who was considering buying the plaintiff's company.²¹ The departing-employee cases take the same form, though in the modern world it is rare for such employees not to have an employment contract. As with the competitive-intelligence cases, trade secret law takes a basic common law principle (there tort, here contract) and supplements it in certain cases in the interest of fairness.

Misappropriation of trade secrets, then, does not simply require use of a trade secret, but acquisition, use, or disclosure of a secret in a way that runs afoul of the prohibitions of trade secret law. Further, some conduct will be protected even if it discloses a trade secret. For example, a defendant who acquires a trade secret by developing it on her own or by reverse engineering it is free to do what she wants with the secret.

¹⁹ [431 F.2d 1012, 1017 \(5th Cir. 1970\)](#).

²⁰ [Id. at 1016](#). Some question whether courts would reach the same result today, see Kevin Werbach, *Sensors and Sensibilities*, [28 Cardozo L. Rev. 2321, 2348-49 \(2007\)](#), but that is because technology has changed expectations of privacy, not because the application of trade secret law to third parties has changed.

²¹ [203 F.2d 369, 376 \(7th Cir. 1953\)](#).

Proof of trade secret misappropriation gives rise to a panoply of remedies whose origin is as diverse as the original sources of trade secret law. Depending on the circumstances, trade secret owners can obtain criminal penalties (a remedy based in criminal law), an injunction (a remedy that sounds in property law), damages measured by the greater of the owner's loss or the defendant's gain (a remedy based in tort law), or a limited "head start" injunction²² designed to put the parties back in the same situation they would have been in had the misappropriation not occurred (a remedy that sounds in the expectation-damages rule of contract law).

// Efforts to Understand Trade Secret Theory

Legal protection for trade secrets has been premised primarily on two theories that are only partly complementary. The first is utilitarian. Under this view, protecting against the theft of proprietary information encourages investment in such information. This idea is sometimes associated with the view that trade secrets are a form of property. The second theory emphasizes deterrence of wrongful acts and is therefore sometimes described as a tort theory. Here the aim of trade secret law is to punish and prevent illicit behavior, and even to uphold reasonable standards of commercial behavior.²³ Although under the tort theory trade secret protection is not explicitly about encouraging investments, it is plain that one consequence of deterring wrongful behavior [*320] would be to encourage investment in trade secrets. Hence, despite their conceptual differences, the tort and property/incentive approaches to trade secrets may well push in the same direction in many respects. These primary theories coexist with other explanations. In this Part, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each existing theory of trade secret protection.

A. Tort Law

A primary explanation for trade secret law throughout the twentieth century is what might be described as a "duty-based" theory, or what Melvin Jager calls "the maintenance of commercial morality."²⁴ The Supreme Court adopted this view in *E.I. du Pont de Nemours Powder Co. v. Masland*, a famous early decision, albeit one that bore only a tangential relationship to trade secret law:

²² A "head start" injunction precludes the defendant from working on a project for a limited period of time, to put it back in the position it would have occupied had misappropriation of the plaintiff's trade secrets not given it a head start on competition. See, e.g., [Winston Research Corp. v. Minn. Mining & Mfg. Co.](#), 350 F.2d 134, 142 (9th Cir. 1965).

²³ Cf. Kim Lane Scheppele, *Legal Secrets: Equality and Efficiency in the Common Law* 263, 308, 312 (1988) (arguing that cases involving legal secrets - including trade secret cases - are better explained in terms of principles all would be willing to agree to rather than in the efficiency terms of law and economics).

²⁴ 1 Jager, *supra* note 1, § 1:3, 1-4.

The word "property" as applied to trademarks and trade secrets is an unanalyzed expression of certain secondary consequences of the primary fact that the law makes some rudimentary requirements of good faith. Whether the plaintiffs have any valuable secret or not the defendant knows the facts, whatever they are, through a special confidence that he accepted. The property may be denied, but the confidence cannot be. Therefore the starting point for the present matter is not property or due process of law, but that the defendant stood in confidential relations with the plaintiffs²⁵

This tort-based view gained significant currency at the beginning of the twentieth century, in part because of Masland but also because of changing conceptions of property.²⁶ By 1939, the American Law Institute firmly classed trade secret misappropriation as a tort, including it in the Restatement of Torts.²⁷ The tort-based view is also frequently invoked today by scholars seeking to justify trade secret law,²⁸ and sometimes by those who believe the [*321] tort approach will help limit that law.²⁹ The ultimate expression of the tort view would replace trade secrets entirely with a general tort of wrongful misappropriation of information.³⁰

The problem with the tort view is that it is ultimately empty. It presupposes a wrong without offering any substantive definition of what that wrong is. In Masland, it appears to be the breach of a confidential relationship that is the problem. Masland is not alone: many trade secret cases arise out of a "duty" explicitly stated in a contract, such as a technology license or an employment agreement. But if that is

²⁵ [244 U.S. 100, 102 \(1917\)](#). The actual issue in Masland was whether the trial court had discretion to prohibit disclosure of the secret to an outside expert during litigation. Pooley, *supra* note 1, § 1.02[8][b], 1-16.

The Court in *Ruckelshaus v. Monsanto Co.* attempted to distinguish Masland in a footnote, claiming that "Justice Holmes did not deny the existence of a property interest; he simply deemed determination of the existence of that interest irrelevant to the resolution of the case." [467 U.S. 986, 1004 n.9 \(1984\)](#). This seems a weak argument; the point of Masland was that the plaintiff did not need a property right in order to obtain relief under the trade secret laws. That point is at fundamental odds with the property theory of trade secrets.

²⁶ See also *Eastman Co. v. Reichenbach*, 20 N.Y.S. 110, 115-16 (Sup. Ct. 1892).

²⁷ **Restatement of Torts** §§757-58 (1939). Notably, the ALI had abandoned that position by the time the Second Restatement was published in 1979, on the grounds that the law of trade secrets had developed into an independent body of law that no longer relied on general principles of tort law.

²⁸ See, e.g., Hill, *supra* note 1, at 2; Lynn Sharp Paine, Trade Secrets and the Justification of Intellectual Property: A Comment on Hettinger, 20 Phil. & Pub. Aff. 247, 249 (1991); cf. Chiappetta, *supra* note 1, at 93, 94 (dividing trade secret law into distinct categories, including some based on unjust enrichment or contract law).

²⁹ See, e.g., Pamela Samuelson, Privacy as Intellectual Property?, [52 Stan. L. Rev. 1125, 1153 \(2000\)](#).

³⁰ For such a proposal, see C. Owen Paepke, An Economic Interpretation of the Misappropriation Doctrine: Common Law Protection for Investments in Innovation, 2 High Tech. L.J. 55, 56, 69 (1987).

the wrong, trade secret law is nothing more than contract law.³¹ The tort-based theory of breach of duty merges in those cases with a standard common law action for breach of contract, express or implied. Calling this breach a trade secret claim merely adds a stronger panoply of remedies for what is in essence a breach of contract claim. And if the gravamen of trade secret misappropriation is nothing more than contract, why would we want to make breach of that contract a crime?

The problem of lack of substantive guidelines becomes more acute with the "improper means" prong of trade secret law. It is unhelpful for courts to say no more than that people cannot act "improperly" in acquiring information. If by "improper means" the law intends nothing more than that acts already illegal (hacking, trespass, theft) are illegal here as well, then it has the same problem as the breach of confidence prong: trade secret law adds nothing to existing doctrine.³² But most people think improper means encompasses more. In *E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. v. Christopher*,³³ for example, the aerial photography case discussed above, the court acknowledged that the defendants had broken no law. Nonetheless, the court found that their "school boy's trick" was improper. The court does not offer a particularly clear standard, however:

We realize that industrial espionage of the sort here perpetrated has become a popular sport in some segments of our industrial community. However, our devotion to free wheeling industrial competition must not force us into accepting the law of the jungle as the standard of morality expected in our commercial relations. Our tolerance of the espionage game must cease when the protections required to prevent another's spying cost so much that the spirit of inventiveness is dampened. Commercial privacy must be protected [*322] from espionage which could not have been reasonably anticipated or prevented... . Perhaps ordinary fences and roofs must be built to shut out incursive eyes, but we need not require the discoverer of a trade secret to guard against the unanticipated, the undetectable, or the unpreventable methods of espionage now available.

In the instant case DuPont was in the midst of constructing a plant. Although after construction the finished plant would have protected much of the process from view, during the period of construction the trade secret was exposed to view from the air.

³¹ Robert Bone makes this point. Bone, *supra* note 4, at 244; see also David A. Rice, Public Goods, Private Contract and Public Policy: Federal Preemption of Software License Prohibitions Against Reverse Engineering, [53 U. Pitt. L. Rev. 543, 622 \(1992\)](#) ("Contract plays a critical role in trade secret protection. Although neither the fountain nor foundation of trade secret law, it is an important instrument in defining and securing protection of closely held information.").

³² Bone, *supra* note 4, at 298-99.

³³ [431 F.2d 1012 \(5th Cir. 1970\)](#).

To require DuPont to put a roof over the unfinished plant to guard its secret would impose an enormous expense to prevent nothing more than a school boy's trick.³⁴

While there is a standard here - the court will judge the relative costs of protection and of espionage - it is not one that is predictable or easy to implement.

That vagueness in itself wouldn't necessarily be a problem; we have vague standards in other areas of law where needed to achieve efficient results. And some would argue that the case itself is *sui generis*. But the Christopher case begs a larger question: why is it bad to acquire information in this way? We don't always or even often punish efforts to obtain competitive intelligence through legal means. One reading Christopher's standard might reasonably wonder, for example, why reverse engineering a chemical, or learning a competitor's prices by walking through their store during business hours, or attempting to predict a competitor's business strategy based on their market behavior, aren't similarly cheap efforts to acquire knowledge that would be expensive to protect. And yet those activities are clearly legal.

The courts applying the tort standard are effectively defining certain acts as "unfair competition" or "free riding." But there is a growing tendency in the courts to treat the term "unfair competition" as redundant, using the doctrine to punish aggressive competition in the name of protecting "fair" business practices. Without some reason to protect a secret, the tort theory of secrecy is likely to devolve into challenges to a variety of competitive information-gathering, with courts unable to resolve those challenges on any principled basis, instead making ad hoc judgments based on their perception of the defendant's intent.³⁵ And that in turn leaves a zone of uncertainty around [*323] business behavior that is likely to discourage robust competition by companies who fear that competition may later be deemed unfair. It may also have similar deterrent effects on departing employees: courts are more likely to impose obligations on departing employees and to punish those deemed to have acted

³⁴ [Id. at 1016.](#)

³⁵ Something similar has arguably happened in trademark law, where the multifactor likelihood of consumer confusion test - designed to evoke and rely upon consumer perceptions of the marks - has in practice devolved into an inquiry primarily focused on the judge's perception of the defendant's intent in adopting the mark. See Barton Beebe, *An Empirical Study of the Multifactor Tests for Trademark Infringement*, [94 Cal. L. Rev. 1581, 1623-31 \(2006\)](#) (demonstrating this empirically). On the problems that creates, see Stacey L. Dogan & Mark A. Lemley, *Grounding Trademark Law Through Trademark Use*, [92 Iowa L. Rev. 1669, 1694 \(2007\)](#) ("The trademark owners that have succeeded in holding defendants liable for non-trademark uses have done so by claiming that the defendant engaged in 'free riding.' But permissible free riding is everywhere. Since we lack any normative baseline for defining what forms of free riding should be forbidden, the likelihood-of-confusion test standing alone cannot establish any limits on the ability of trademark owners to forbid a new category of uses.").

unfaithfully if they view "bad acts" and breach of contract as the central justifications for trade secret law. ³⁶

B. Contract Law

Courts and commentators have periodically suggested that trade secret law is (or more commonly, should be) coextensive with contract. ³⁷ The problems with contract as a stand-alone explanation for trade secret law are two-fold. First, contract theory cannot explain an important subset of trade secret cases: those determining legal rights between strangers. This includes not only the improper-means cases, but also those in which a trade secret is acquired by accident or mistake, ³⁸ and those in which liability extends not merely to those in privity with the trade secret owner but also to those who deal with one who is in privity. ³⁹ At best, then, contractual relations could be only a partial explanation for trade secret law. ⁴⁰ Second, even in the subset of cases dealing with parties in a contractual relationship, contract theory cannot explain the various ways in which trade secret law departs from enforcing the bargain those courts have struck. ⁴¹ Nor can a contract theory explain the strong remedies [*324] afforded trade secret owners. In no other area of contract law do we impose criminal penalties.

C. Property Law

The most significant competing theory of trade secrets is that they are property rights, something owned because possessed by the trade secret plaintiff. This

³⁶ Graves, *supra* note 1, at 45-46, makes this point.

³⁷ See 1 Jager, *supra* note 1, § 4:1 (discussing contract theories of trade secret law); Thornton Robison, The Confidence Game: An Approach to the Law About Trade Secrets, 25 *Ariz. L. Rev.* 347, 383 (1983); cf. [ConFold Pac., Inc. v. Polar Indus., Inc.](#), 433 *F.3d* 952, 959 (7th Cir. 2006) (reading trade secret law as dictated by a combination of contract and tort); Edmund W. Kitch, Intellectual Property and the Common Law, 78 *Va. L. Rev.* 293 (1992) (arguing that contract underlies IP more generally).

³⁸ Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 1(2)(ii)(C), 14 U.L.A 433 (1985).

³⁹ *Id.* § 1(2)(ii)(B). On this problem, see Ashish Arora & Robert P. Merges, Specialized Supply Firms, Property Rights and Firm Boundaries, 13 *Indus. & Corp. Change* 451 (2004); Dan L. Burk, Intellectual Property and the Firm, 71 *U. Chi. L. Rev.* 3, 8-9 (2004); Dan L. Burk & Brett H. McDonnell, The Goldilocks Hypothesis: Balancing Intellectual Property Rights at the Boundary of the Firm, 2007 *U. Ill. L. Rev.* 575, 592-93, 608-09; Oren Bar-Gill & Gideon Parchomovsky, Intellectual Property Law and the Boundaries of the Firm 2 (Univ. of Pa. Law Sch. Law & Econ. Research Paper Series, Paper No. 04-19, 2004), available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=702464 (adopting Burk's framework). Cf. Merges, *supra* note 1 (adopting a theory of the firm approach to employee inventions).

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the differences between trade secret law and contract law, see Alan J. Tracey, The Contract in the Trade Secret Ballroom - A Forgotten Dance Partner?, 16 *Tex. Intell. Prop. L.J.* 47, 69-79 (2007).

⁴¹ I discuss those ways, and their importance, *infra* notes 159-64 and accompanying text.

seems to have been a commonly held view in the nineteenth century,⁴² though analysis of the early cases is complicated by the fact that the label "property" at that time meant something rather different than it means to many people today, and often little more than that the right was to be protected by the injunctive power of courts in equity (the "property rule").⁴³ After a period in which the property approach took a back seat to misappropriation theory, the Supreme Court resurrected the property view of trade secret law in *Ruckelshaus v. Monsanto Co.*⁴⁴ There the Court faced the question of whether a federal law that required Monsanto to publicly disclose its trade secrets was a "taking of private property" for which the Fifth Amendment required compensation. The Court, in finding that trade secrets could be "property" protected by the Constitution, reasoned in part that "trade secrets have many of the characteristics of more tangible forms of property. A trade secret is assignable. A trade secret can form the res of a trust, and it passes to a trustee in [*325] bankruptcy."⁴⁵ Many have argued that the UTSA ushered in a property view of trade secrets as well.⁴⁶

Treating trade secrets as property begs the question of why the government has created such property, however. After all, these secrets have not been protected since time immemorial. Nor are they rivalrously consumed, so that absent legal protection the information that is the basis of the protection would be "overused" like a commons might be overgrazed.⁴⁷ Courts made a decision to grant protection,

⁴² See *Peabody v. Norfolk*, 98 Mass. 452, 458 (1868). For a critical analysis of the history of trade secrets as property, see Miguel Deutch, The Property Concept of Trade Secrets in Anglo-American Law: An Ongoing Debate, 31 U. Rich. L. Rev. 313 (1997).

⁴³ Robert Bone discusses the nineteenth century history in detail. See Bone, *supra* note 4, at 251-59.

⁴⁴ 467 U.S. 986, 1001-04 (1984). For property-based defenses of trade secret law, see, for example, Deutch, *supra* note 42, at 320; Graves, *supra* note 1, at 41-42; Adam Mossoff, What Is Property? Putting the Pieces Back Together, 45 Ariz. L. Rev. 371, 415-18 (2003); Pace, *supra* note 1, at 428. For criticism of the property conception in general, and Monsanto in particular, see Pamela Samuelson, Information as Property: Do Ruckelshaus and Carpenter Signal a Changing Direction in Intellectual Property Law?, 38 Cath. U. L. Rev. 365, 374-83 (1989).

⁴⁵ *Monsanto*, 467 U.S. at 1002-04. To the same effect is *Philip Morris, Inc. v. Reilly*, 312 F.3d 24 (1st Cir. 2002) (en banc) (holding that state regulation requiring disclosure of the content of cigarettes was a regulatory taking of trade secrets). See also *E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. v. United States*, 288 F.2d 904, 912 (Ct. Cl. 1961) (upholding takings claim); *DVD Copy Control Ass'n v. Bunner*, 75 P.3d 1, 14 (Cal. 2003) (holding that trade secrets represent "a constitutionally recognized property interest in [information]"); *Cadence Design Sys., Inc. v. Avant! Corp.*, 57 P.3d 647 (Cal. 2002) (treating trade secrets as property rights for purposes of determining statute of limitations); 1 Milgrim & Bensen, *supra* note 1, § 2.01[1]-[2], 2-23 (claiming that "practically all jurisdictions have recognized that a trade secret is property" at least in certain senses); Richard A. Epstein, The Constitutional Protection of Trade Secrets Under the Takings Clause, 71 U. Chi. L. Rev. 57, 61 (2004) (endorsing a takings analysis of trade secrets).

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Lynn C. Tyler, Trade Secrets in Indiana: Property vs. Relationship, 31 Ind. L. Rev. 339, 339 (1998).

⁴⁷ See Garrett Hardin, The Tragedy of the Commons, 162 Science 1243 (1968). Some scholars have argued that information isn't a public good, and therefore is subject to the tragedy of the commons, because its value may depend on secrecy. See Amitai Aviram & Avishalom Tor, Overcoming Impediments to Information Sharing, 55 Ala. L. Rev. 231, 234-35 (2004). But that argument

something that rarely happens with other forms of property.⁴⁸ Further, while secrecy is a requirement of protection, courts make it clear that trade secret owners do not have to maintain perfect secrecy. They are free to market products incorporating the secret, and to disclose the secret itself to others in the service of making money.⁴⁹ The "property," then, is not merely a right to exclude others from something in the sole possession of the plaintiff, but a right to restrict the access, use, and disclosure of information that is actually or potentially in the possession of others, often through the action of the secret owner herself.

References to a "property" right in trade secret law, therefore, seem in fact not to mean that nonpublic information is similar to real or chattel property, but instead to mean that trade secrets should be treated as IP rights.⁵⁰ The trade [*326] secret owner is entitled to control certain information even once it has left the owner's possession. Why? "Because I possess it" cannot be the answer. The answer instead must be instrumental. We grant rights over secret information for the same reason we grant rights in patent and copyright law - to encourage investment in the research and development that produces the information.⁵¹

Treatment of trade secrets as property rights vested in the trade secret "owner" is consistent with a view of trade secret law as providing an additional incentive to innovate beyond those provided in patent law. Trade secrets protect types of

confuses the intrinsic value and characteristics of the information with the private value that may result from the legal decision to protect that information as a secret. For further discussion, see Mark A. Lemley, Property, Intellectual Property, and Free Riding, [83 Tex. L. Rev. 1031, 1052 n.87 \(2005\)](#).

⁴⁸ While trade secret law is now statutory in most states, it originally developed as common law in all of them.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., [Metallurgical Indus., Inc. v. Fourtek, Inc., 790 F.2d 1195, 1200-01 \(5th Cir. 1986\)](#).

⁵⁰ Bone believes that the core features of trade secret law, unlike other forms of IP law, are limited to relations between parties. Bone, *supra* note 4, at 244. But I think he understates the importance of trade secret rules that reach beyond the bounds of any formal relationship to punish some conduct vis-a-vis strangers, and overstates the relationship-independence of other IP rights. Copyright in particular requires copying, and therefore a "relationship" with the plaintiff's subject matter in just the same way trade secret law does. Cf. Risch, *supra* note 1, at 18-23 (discussing a distinction between "collateral property" and "substantive property" rights).

Whether IP rights should be thought of as property rights is a matter of some dispute. It seems clear that IP rights differ in fundamental respects from land and other forms of tangible property. See, e.g., Lemley, *supra* note 47, at 1033-46. A number of scholars have argued that the concept of property is much broader than its tangible instantiations, and that it should include IP rights even though they are properly treated very differently than other forms of property. See, e.g., Michael A. Carrier, Cabining Intellectual Property Through a Property Paradigm, [54 Duke L.J. 1 \(2004\)](#); Richard A. Epstein, Intellectual Property: Old Boundaries and New Frontiers, [76 Ind. L.J. 803, 804 \(2001\)](#). But see Peter S. Menell, The Property Rights Movement's Embrace of Intellectual Property: True Love or Doomed Relationship?, [34 Ecology L.Q. 713 \(2007\)](#); Stewart E. Sterk, Intellectualizing Property: The Tenuous Connections Between Land and Copyright, [83 Wash. U. L.Q. 417 \(2005\)](#). For purposes of this Article, it does not matter whether IP is property. It is sufficient to say that when trade secret courts speak of property, they mean IP.

⁵¹ Richard Epstein conceives of trade secrets as property, but minimizes the difference between real property and IP. Richard A. Epstein, The Constitutional Protection of Trade Secrets Under the Takings Clause, [71 U. Chi. L. Rev. 57, 58 \(2004\)](#). My disagreements with the latter point are set out in detail elsewhere. See Lemley, *supra* note 47, at 1033-46.

information that are not eligible for patent protection.⁵² They also provide immediate protection, while it takes years to get a patent. The Supreme Court has offered some support for this incentive view in cases such as *Kewanee Oil Co. v. Bicron Corp.*⁵³ But protecting secrecy seems an odd way of encouraging innovation. As a result, a number of commentators have suggested that if trade secret law is an IP right, it is a misguided one.⁵⁴

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D. Commercial Morality and Other Theories

While the IP and tort theories have predominated in judicial decisions and scholarly commentary, commentators and occasional courts have offered other theories in an attempt to unify and justify trade secret law.⁵⁵ Most notable is the oft-quoted justification that trade secret law is designed to maintain "standards of commercial morality."⁵⁶ This norm-based approach would embed in legal doctrine the common standards of behavior, either across industries or varying the law industry-by-industry.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, the commercial morality approach doesn't cure the defects of tort-based theories of trade secrecy. "Commercial morality" has no more substantive content than "unfair competition" or "unjust enrichment" - it still requires some

⁵² See *infra* notes 69-83 and accompanying text.

⁵³ [416 U.S. 470, 481-85 \(1974\)](#).

⁵⁴ Bone, for example, argues that there is no evidence that we need the additional incentive provided by trade secret law in areas patent does not reach, and that that incentive comes at too great a cost. Bone, *supra* note 4, at 266-70. As I explain in Part III, I believe Bone is mistaken about the choice set facing technology companies absent trade secret law, and accordingly about the relative costs of having and not having that law.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Bruce T. Atkins, *Trading Secrets in the Information Age: Can Trade Secret Law Survive the Internet?*, [1996 U. Ill. L. Rev. 1151](#) (arguing for a reconception of trade secrets as a privacy right). Ironically, Sharon Sandeen argues for the reverse: rethinking privacy as a trade secret right. Sharon K. Sandeen, *Relative Privacy: What Privacy Advocates Can Learn from Trade Secret Law*, [2006 Mich. St. L. Rev. 667](#).

⁵⁶ [E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. v. Christopher](#), [431 F.2d 1012, 1016 \(5th Cir. 1970\)](#) (refusing to accept "the law of the jungle as the standard of morality expected in our commercial relations"); [Jet Spray Cooler, Inc. v. Crampton](#), [385 N.E.2d 1349, 1354-55 \(Mass. 1979\)](#) (stating that the law encourages trade secrets because of the public interest "in the maintenance of standards of commercial ethics") (citation omitted); [Hyde Corp. v. Huffines](#), [314 S.W.2d 763, 773 \(Tex. 1958\)](#) ("The undoubted tendency of [trade secret] law has been to recognize and enforce higher standards of commercial morality in the business world."); [Restatement of Torts § 757](#) cmt. f at 10 (1939) (stating that improper means are those "which fall below the generally accepted standards of commercial morality and reasonable conduct"); 1 Jager, *supra* note 1, § 1:3, 1-4; Chiappetta, *supra* note 1, at 73 (defending trade secret law in part as directed against torts that "threaten public order"); Harry Wingo, *Dumpster Diving and the Ethical Blindspot of Trade Secret Law*, [16 Yale L. & Pol'y Rev. 195 \(1997\)](#).

⁵⁷ On the historical role of commercial morality in trade secret law, see Catherine L. Fisk, *Working Knowledge: Trade Secrets, Restrictive Covenants in Employment, and the Rise of Corporate Intellectual Property, 1800-1920*, [52 Hastings L.J. 441, 443 \(2001\)](#).

external source to determine what behavior is and is not moral.⁵⁸ To be sure, the commercial morality approach does at least point us to an external source - the emergent consensus (if there is one) of what constitutes acceptable behavior. But relying on such a vague norm to set legal standards has a number of problems. It is context and time dependent; normal behavior in one industry may end up being illegal in another. Those norms may change over time in ways that make protection unpredictable; flying over a chemical plant to see how it was laid out was improper in 1970,⁵⁹ but one might reasonably doubt that looking at satellite photos of the same plant on Google [*328] Earth would be illegal today. It requires courts to engage in what Stephen Carter has called "judicial ... anthropology,"⁶⁰ an endeavor at which they may not be particularly skilled. It is likely to lead to inefficient results, retarding rather than enhancing innovation.⁶¹ And its inherent vagueness may create due process problems, particularly when trade secret law is enforced through criminal sanctions. In any event, commercial morality may not do a very good job of explaining the case law: one study found no evidence that courts actually took ethics into account in rendering their trade secret decisions.⁶²

E. Bone's Challenge: Does Trade Secret Law Serve a Purpose?

Finally, Robert Bone has surveyed this doctrinal morass and decided that the game isn't worth the candle. Bone's argument is that none of the theories of trade secret law work. He claims:

Those who tout economic efficiency either ignore the broader legal context within which trade secret law operates or fail to take into account all the costs of a trade secret system. Those who argue from rights and fairness are unable to identify a right or a coherent conception of fairness that fits trade secret law. And those who point to conventional norms - so-called "generally accepted standards of commercial morality and reasonable conduct" - do so without citing empirical

⁵⁸ Interestingly, Yuval Feldman has conducted surveys suggesting that departing employees are in fact motivated by their beliefs both as to what is moral and, more importantly, what their new employer would consider legitimate. See Yuval Feldman, *The Behavioral Foundations of Trade Secrets: Tangibility, Authorship, and Legality*, 3 *J. Empirical Legal Stud.* 197 (2006).

⁵⁹ [Christopher, 431 F.2d at 1017.](#)

⁶⁰ Stephen L. Carter, *Custom, Adjudication, and Petrushevsky's Watch: Some Notes From the Intellectual Property Front*, [78 Va. L. Rev. 129, 140 \(1992\)](#); see also Jennifer E. Rothman, *The Questionable Use of Custom in Intellectual Property*, [93 Va. L. Rev. 1899, 1905-06 \(2007\)](#) (challenging judicial efforts to discern and rely upon private customs in IP cases).

⁶¹ Chally, *supra* note 1, at 1271.

⁶² Anita Cava & Don Wiesner, *Stealing Trade Secrets Ethically*, [47 Md. L. Rev. 1076, 1127-28 \(1988\)](#).

support for the conventions they invoke and without explaining why trade secret remedies are needed to enforce these norms.⁶³

He argues that most of the positive virtues of trade secret law can be found in other legal doctrines, notably contract and tort law.⁶⁴ To the extent that trade secret law goes beyond those doctrines, as in the Christopher case, he argues that it is unjustified.⁶⁵ The common law, says Bone, can do just fine - and accomplish most of the same ends - without a doctrine of trade secret law.⁶⁶

[*329] Bone's criticism has particular bite for those who claim that trade secret law doesn't really have a single theoretical basis, but a multitude of them: that it is part tort, part contract, part property, part commercial morality.⁶⁷ Perhaps this is fair enough as a descriptive matter,⁶⁸ but it begs Bone's question: if trade secret law is simply a compilation of bits and pieces of other laws, what good is it to speak of trade secret law at all, and how can one justify the parts of that law that don't track their common law sources?

In Part III, I suggest that trade secrets are best conceived as IP rights, and that, as IP rights, they work - they serve the basic purposes of IP laws.

III. Constructing an IP Theory of Trade Secrets

Trade secrets are best understood not as applications or extensions of existing common law principles (warranted or unwarranted), but as IP rights. In this Part, I explain the two critical features trade secrets share with other IP rights - they promote inventive activity and they promote disclosure of those inventions. I then seek to explain the most significant anomaly - the requirement of secrecy.

A. Incentives to Invent

⁶³ Bone, *supra* note 4, at 246 (citations omitted).

⁶⁴ *Id.*; cf. James H.A. Pooley, *Restrictive Employee Covenants in California*, 4 *Santa Clara Computer & High Tech. L.J.* 251, 282 (1988) (arguing for an understanding of trade secret law that combines property theory and tort theory).

⁶⁵ Bone, *supra* note 4, at 297-98, 302-04.

⁶⁶ Bone's criticism receives support from a surprising source - Landes and Posner, who assert that "there is no law of trade secrets." William M. Landes & Richard A. Posner, *The Economic Structure of Intellectual Property Law* 355 (2003); see also Edwin C. Hettlinger, *Justifying Intellectual Property*, 18 *Phil. & Pub. Aff.* 31, 51-52 (1989) (noting problematic theoretical aspects of trade secret law).

⁶⁷ See, e.g., Milgrim & Bensen, *supra* note 1, § 3.01; I. Neel Chatterjee, *Should Trade Secret Appropriation Be Criminalized?*, 19 *Hastings Comm. & Ent. L.J.* 853, 874-75 (1997). One might also read Chiappetta's fragmented theory of trade secret justifications, while styled as a response to Bone, as more of a concession that Bone is at base correct, for Chiappetta believes there is no one justification for trade secret law. See Chiappetta, *supra* note 1, at 73-75.

⁶⁸ See [ConFold Pac., Inc. v. Polaris Indus., Inc., 433 F.3d 952 \(7th Cir. 2006\)](#) (citing a variety of theories as justifying trade secret protection).

Trade secret law confers an exclusive right on the possessor of valuable information not generally known to or readily ascertainable by competitors.⁶⁹ Exclusivity is the hallmark of an IP right. Both patents and copyrights confer similar rights to prevent use by others on the developers of new and valuable information. In so doing, patents and copyrights are generally acknowledged to serve a utilitarian purpose - the grant of that legal control encourages the development of new and valuable information by offering the prospect of supracompetitive returns, returns possible only if the developer does not face competition by others who use the same idea. In this way, patents and copyrights avoid the risk of underinvestment inherent with public goods, which are more costly to invent than to imitate once invented.⁷⁰

[*330] Trade secrecy has the same effect. It gives the developer of new and valuable information the right to restrict others from using it, and therefore the prospect of deriving supracompetitive profits from the information.⁷¹ This may be true of business as well as technical secrets, since some protection for business ideas helps ensure a first-mover advantage for those who take risks on untested business models.⁷² True, the right of exclusion in trade secret law is not absolute. The trade secret owner cannot sue someone who develops the idea independently, or who reverse engineers a product on the open market to learn the secret.⁷³ But the same is true of copyright law.⁷⁴ A right to exclude does not have to be absolute to be effective in rewarding and therefore encouraging innovation. It need merely provide sufficient advantage in terms of lead time or relative costs to minimize or eliminate the public goods problem.

⁶⁹ Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 1(4), 14 U.L.A. 433 (1985).

⁷⁰ See Mark A. Lemley, The Economics of Improvement in Intellectual Property Law, [75 Tex. L. Rev. 989, 993-1000 \(1997\)](#) and sources cited therein for discussion of this basic proposition.

⁷¹ Chally, *supra* note 1, at 1270-71. But see Risch, *supra* note 1, at 26 (contending that "creating incentives to innovate is a very minor justification of trade secret law").

⁷² David D. Friedman, Trade Secret, in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics and the Law* 604-06 (Peter Newman ed., 1998); cf. Michael Abramowicz & John F. Duffy, Intellectual Property for Market Experimentation, [83 N.Y.U. L. Rev. 337 \(2008\)](#) (making the case for IP protection for new business ideas). I think Abramowicz and Duffy's thought experiment goes rather too far - there is a difference between protecting secrets from prying eyes and giving an exclusive franchise to a new market - but the incentive point has merit.

⁷³ See [Restatement \(Third\) of Unfair Competition § 43](#) (1995) (defining improper means of acquiring a trade secret and listing proper means that do not give rise to liability); [Restatement of Torts § 757](#) cmt. f (1939).

⁷⁴ See, e.g., [Sega Enters. Ltd. v. Accolade, Inc., 977 F.2d 1510, 1520-23 \(9th Cir. 1992\)](#) (holding that reverse engineering for interoperability is protected fair use under copyright); Merges et al., *supra* note 8, at 373 (noting that "the independent development of a similar or even identical work is perfectly legal" under copyright law).

The Supreme Court has acknowledged that trade secrets give companies incentives to innovate. In *Kewanee Oil Co. v. Bicron Corp.*,⁷⁵ the Court refused to hold that patent law preempted trade secret law, reasoning in part:

The patent policy of encouraging invention is not disturbed by the existence of another form of incentive to invention. In this respect the two systems are not and never would be in conflict

... .

... Trade secret law will encourage invention in areas where patent law does not reach, and will prompt the independent innovator to proceed with the discovery and exploitation of his invention. Competition is fostered and the public is not deprived of the use of valuable, if not quite patentable, invention.⁷⁶

Kewanee's conclusion that two incentive systems can never conflict is too facile; the goal is not simply to maximize legal protection, but to balance it. **[*331]** Nonetheless, the Kewanee Court is right in one important respect: the additional incentive provided by trade secret law is important for innovation.⁷⁷ Trade secret law reaches into a number of corners patent law cannot. The definition of trade secret (valuable information) is broader than the definition of patentable subject matter, for example, protecting business plans, customer lists, and so-called "negative know-how" against use by others.⁷⁸ Patent law cannot protect valuable information of that sort.⁷⁹ Further, inventors must apply for patents, publish their applications after eighteen months, and then wait perhaps four years for the Patent and Trademark Office to decide whether to grant protection.⁸⁰ That significant delay

⁷⁵ [416 U.S. 470 \(1974\)](#).

⁷⁶ [Id. at 484-85](#). But see [Winston Research Corp. v. Minn. Mining & Mfg. Co.](#), 350 F.2d 134, 138 n.2 (9th Cir. 1965) ("State law protecting trade secrets cannot be based "on a policy of rewarding or otherwise encouraging the development of secret processes or devices." (quoting *Restatement of Torts* § 757 cmt. b (1939))).

⁷⁷ But see Chiappetta, *supra* note 1, at 74 (referring to incentives to invent as "solely a byproduct" of his theory of moral behavior). I believe Chiappetta has the tail wagging the dog here.

⁷⁸ This does not mean that every piece of information should be protectable. Cf. Annemarie Bridy, Trade Secret Prices and High-Tech Devices: How Medical Device Manufacturers Are Seeking to Sustain Profits by Propertizing Prices, [17 Tex. Intell. Prop. L.J. 187](#) (forthcoming 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1242462> (arguing that prices should not be trade secrets).

⁷⁹ While patent law has expanded in recent years to cover new and nonobvious business methods, see [State St. Bank & Trust Co. v. Signature Fin. Group, Inc.](#), 149 F.3d 1368, 1375-77 (Fed. Cir. 1998), it does not reach information not embodied in some technical form, such as a customer list. Cf. [In re Comiskey](#), 499 F.3d 1365, 1377-78 (Fed. Cir. 2007) (holding that a method for mandatory arbitration was unpatentable subject matter).

⁸⁰ Although it took patents an average of 2.77 years to issue in the late 1990s, see John R. Allison & Mark A. Lemley, Who's Patenting What? An Empirical Exploration of Patent Prosecution, [53 Vand. L. Rev. 2099, 2101 \(2000\)](#), the backlog has increased significantly since that time.

renders patents unavailable as a practical matter in fast-moving industries. Trade secrets, by contrast, are automatically protected upon creation provided the requirements of the statute are met. Finally, patent litigation is as much as three times as expensive as trade secret litigation, with a price tag - a median of \$ 5 million per side in legal fees for large cases - that puts it out of reach of many small firms.⁸¹ Small wonder, then, that economic literature suggests that some firms, particularly start-ups, rely heavily on the incentive to invent provided by trade secret law.⁸² In many cases patents are simply not an adequate substitute.

Trade secret law also reaches where contract alone cannot. Trade secret law precludes acquisition of information by strangers using improper means - [*332] computer hacking and other forms of corporate espionage. Further, it extends the reach of the law beyond privity of contract to anyone who comes into contact with a secret knowing that they have acquired it by accident, mistake, or by another's malfeasance.⁸³

B. Incentives to Disclose

Patent and copyright law do not exist solely to encourage invention, however. A second purpose - some argue the main one⁸⁴ - is to ensure that the public receives the benefit of those inventions. Patent and copyright law address this goal in various ways. Patent law requires that an applicant describe her invention in sufficient detail that a person of ordinary skill in the field can make and use it,⁸⁵ and requires that that information be published.⁸⁶ As a result, the public is free to read the patent and use the invention once the patent expires twenty years after it is filed, and even before that time scientists can learn from the patent disclosure and use that information to improve on the invention or to design around it.⁸⁷ Further, patent law

⁸¹ Am. Intell. Prop. L. Ass'n, Report of the Economic Survey 2007, at 25-26 (2007) (noting that high-end patent litigation costs a median of \$ 3 million per side through discovery, and \$ 5 million per side if it goes to trial; high-end trade secret cases, by contrast, cost a median of \$ 1 million through discovery and \$ 1.75 million through trial).

⁸² See, e.g., Josh Lerner, The Importance of Trade Secrecy: Evidence from Civil Litigation (Harvard Bus. Sch. Working Paper 95-043, 1999), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=6089> (documenting the significance of trade secrets to small firms). For a contrary view, pointing to the benefits to start-ups of using information from others, see Alan Hyde, Working in Silicon Valley: Economic and Legal Analysis of a High-Velocity Labor Market 29-31 (2003).

⁸³ Unif. Trade Secrets Act §§1(2)(i), 1(2)(ii)(B)(i)-(iii), 1(2)(ii)(C), 14 U.L.A. 433 (1985).

⁸⁴ See, e.g., Robert A. Kreiss, Accessibility and Commercialization in Copyright Theory, *43 UCLA L. Rev.* 1 (1995).

⁸⁵ **35 U.S.C. § 112** (2000).

⁸⁶ **35 U.S.C. § 122(b)**.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., Matthew J. Conigliaro et al., Foreseeability in Patent Law, *16 Berkeley Tech. L.J.* 1045, 1056-57 (2001). On the social benefits of design-arounds that can result from disclosure, see, for example, *Warner-Jenkinson Co. v. Hilton Davis Chem. Co.*, *520 U.S.* 17, 36 (1997), which contrasts "the intentional copyist making minor changes to lower the risk of legal action" with "the incremental innovator designing around the claims, yet seeking to capture as much as is permissible of the patented advance."

discourages secrecy in a number of ways.⁸⁸ It is not clear that patent law serves this disclosure function [*333] particularly well,⁸⁹ but it seems quite clear that dissemination, not just invention, of new information is one of the goals of the patent system. Copyright similarly encourages disclosure in various ways, originally by conditioning protection on publication of a work⁹⁰ and even today by requiring deposit of the work with the Library of Congress, where it is available to others in most circumstances.⁹¹ There is decent evidence to support the idea that at least one function of an IP right is not just to encourage new invention, but to encourage the dissemination of those new ideas.

See also [Slimfold Mfg. Co. v. Kinkead Indus., Inc.](#), 932 F.2d 1453, 1457 (Fed. Cir. 1991) ("Designing around patents is, in fact, one of the ways in which the patent system works to the advantage of the public in promoting progress in the useful arts, its constitutional purpose."); [State Indus., Inc. v. A.O. Smith Corp.](#), 751 F.2d 1226, 1236 (Fed. Cir. 1985) ("One of the benefits of a patent system is its so-called 'negative incentive' to 'design around' a competitor's products, even when they are patented, thus bringing a steady flow of innovations to the marketplace."); Craig Allen Nard, A Theory of Claim Interpretation, 14 Harv. J.L. & Tech. 1, 40-41 (2000) ("The practice of designing-around extant patents creates viable substitutes and advances, resulting in competition among patented technologies. The public clearly benefits from such activity." (citations omitted)).

⁸⁸ Section 102(b) requires prompt filing once an inventor begins using an invention in its business, at the risk of losing the right to protection. 35 U.S.C. § 102(b). And § 102(g) provides that those who "suppress" or "conceal" an invention lose their claim to be the first inventor, at least until they start down the path to public disclosure. 35 U.S.C. § 102(g); [Paulik v. Rizkalla](#), 760 F.2d 1270 (Fed. Cir. 1985) (en banc). As a result, patent law discourages reliance on secrecy, to the point that a first inventor who maintains that invention as a trade secret may not only lose the right to claim patent protection, but may even be sued for patent infringement by a second inventor who did disclose the invention. See, e.g., [Gillman v. Stern](#), 114 F.2d 28 (2d Cir. 1940); Mark A. Lemley et al., Software and Internet Law 193-95 (3d ed. 2006). But cf. [E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. v. Phillips Petroleum Co.](#), 849 F.2d 1430, 1436 n.5 (Fed. Cir. 1988) (holding that secret research doesn't necessarily lead to a finding of concealment).

⁸⁹ Many companies discourage their engineers from reading patents. See, e.g., Dennis Fernandez, Move Over Letterman: Top 10 Most Common IP Management Mistakes for New Companies, Pat. Strategy & Mgmt. (Law Journal Newsletters, Phila., Pa.), July 2003 ("Additionally, in many cases it may be appropriate for companies, as a matter of policy, to discourage looking at issued patents owned by other entities so as to avoid awareness of potentially infringed patents."); Mark A. Lemley & Ragesh K. Tangri, Ending Patent Law's Willfulness Game, 18 *Berkeley Tech. L.J.* 1085 (2003); Edwin H. Taylor & Glenn E. Von Tersch, A Proposal to Shore Up the Foundations of Patent Law that the Underwater Line Eroded, 20 *Hastings Comm. & Ent. L.J.* 721, 737 (1998) ("As matters now stand many companies discourage employees from reading patents. This presumably lessens the chance that the company will be found to have knowledge of a patent. However, this defeats the basic purpose of the patents [sic] laws, dissemination of information."). While recent changes to the law have reduced the incentive to hide one's head in the sand, see [In re Seagate Tech., LLC](#), 497 F.3d 1360 (Fed. Cir. 2007) (en banc), they have not eliminated it.

Further, many don't do a patent search before developing a new product. Iain M. Cockburn & Rebecca Henderson, The 2003 Intellectual Property Owners Association Survey on Strategic Management of Intellectual Property, at F.6 (2004) (unnumbered working paper) (finding that 67 percent of IP managers disagreed with the statement, "We always do a patent search before initiating any R&D or product development effort"). Even when they do, the quality of the information actually disclosed in a patent may not be particularly helpful to scientists. See Jeanne C. Fromer, Patent Disclosure, 94 Iowa L. Rev. (forthcoming 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1116020> (arguing that patents are not written in ways that communicate useful information to engineers). For an overview of these problems, see Note, The Disclosure Function of the Patent System (Or Lack Thereof), 118 *Harv. L. Rev.* 2007 (2005). The upshot of all this is that, as Kathy Strandburg puts it, "trade secrecy may, in fact, be preferable" to patents in terms of effective disclosure and use. Katherine J. Strandburg, What If There Were a Business Method Use Exemption to Patent Infringement?, 2008 *Mich. St. L. Rev.* 245, 250.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., [Am. Visuals Corp. v. Holland](#), 239 F.2d 740, 744 (2d Cir. 1956) (discussing requirement of publication under the 1909 Act).

⁹¹ 17 U.S.C. § 407 (2000).

At first blush, trade secret law seems to push in the opposite direction. After all, protection under trade secret laws is conditioned on secrecy, and so it seems to encourage secrecy, or at least the development of inventions that can be kept secret. ⁹² Paradoxically, however, trade secret law actually encourages broader disclosure and use of information, not secrecy. It does so in two ways. First, the legal protection trade secret law provides serves as a substitute for **[*334]** investments in physical secrecy that companies might otherwise make. ⁹³ The facts of *E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. v. Christopher* ⁹⁴ once again provide an example. There, the plaintiff was constructing a chemical plant, and during construction it was apparently possible to see the layout of the plant from the air and so to discern the secret process du Pont was using. The court noted that du Pont could have built a temporary roof over the plant during construction, but only at "enormous expense." ⁹⁵ It didn't need to build that roof because the law protected its interest in avoiding (aerial) prying eyes. Had the law not done so, however, it is reasonable to suppose that du Pont might have built the roof rather than risk loss of its trade secrets. That investment in secrecy would have been inefficient; it is cheaper (both for du Pont and for society) for the law to provide that protection. ⁹⁶ And even if the investment in secrecy were efficient for du Pont in the absence of the law, it would still impose a social cost by restricting the flow of information - a cost du Pont would have no reason to take into account.

There is empirical evidence that overinvestment in secrecy is a real problem in the absence of trade secret protection. Examples can be found as far back as the guild system that pervaded Western economies in the Middle Ages. Guilds were places that could and did develop technical knowledge, but in the absence of legal means to protect that knowledge they went to great lengths to prevent others from learning of it, imposing draconian limits on the mobility of employees and the development of competing firms. ⁹⁷ The same problem remains today in countries that do not provide legal protection for secrets. Robert Sherwood studied business practices in Mexico and Brazil, two countries that do not have strong legal protection for trade

⁹² See, e.g., Risch, *supra* note 1, at 38 (noting this objection); Simpson, *supra* note 1, at 1144-45 (making this argument).

⁹³ See Friedman et al., *supra* note 1 (making a version of this argument); Friedman, *supra* note 72, at 604-05 (same).

⁹⁴ [431 F.2d 1012 \(5th Cir. 1970\)](#).

⁹⁵ *Id. at 1016*. Putting a cover on the large plant during construction might or might not itself be an "enormous expense." The better point is that protecting oneself against all the possible ways prying eyes could discern the secret would collectively require enormous expense.

⁹⁶ Landes & Posner, *supra* note 66, at 369 ("A decision in favor of Christopher would have induced firms in DuPont's position to invest heavily in roofing their construction sites."); cf. Kitch, *supra* note 1, at 696-98 (reading Christopher as motivated by the desire to prevent "wasteful expenditures," albeit not necessarily by the desire to prevent excessive secrecy).

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Cipolla, *supra* note 8, at 261 (arguing that guilds restricted competition and therefore technological progress).

secrets and in which resort to the courts may not be viable for a variety of reasons.⁹⁸ He found that companies in those countries make business decisions that inefficiently limit the disclosure of information because they fear that they cannot rely on the courts to prevent the use of information they do disclose.⁹⁹ For example, they **[*335]** may be less willing to contract production out to third parties if it means giving out information about secret processes, even where the third party could use the process more efficiently. They may take elaborate security measures, building walls and fences and hiring armed guards. And they may hire employees whom they expect to be loyal - such as family members - rather than strangers who would do a better job.¹⁰⁰

The problem also remains for products or industries that do not qualify for IP protection. Michael Pollan explains that the developers of new breakfast cereals, for example, engage in enormous efforts to protect the secrecy of their new ideas in order to gain a few months' first-mover advantage. For the same reason, they operate their own machine shops to design the cereals, rather than outsourcing that work to those presumably more specialized in it.¹⁰¹

None of this evidence is perfect. One of the problems with social science is that it is hard to run clean tests in the real world. Nonetheless, there are both logical and evidentiary reasons to believe that, without legal protection, companies in certain industries would invest too much in keeping secrets. These investments are inefficient, in several senses. In many cases, the problem they address could be avoided by the courts at lower cost than the building of walls and fences. Second, physical investments must be made for each secret, while legal investments need be made only if there is misappropriation. That means that even if a physical investment in secrecy is individually cheap, in the aggregate the cost of having to make that investment for every secret may outweigh the cost of resort to law, which will be necessary only in those few cases in which the secret is actually

⁹⁸ Robert M. Sherwood, *Intellectual Property and Economic Development* 111-17 (1990).

⁹⁹ *Id.* at 113-16.

¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Michael Risch recounts the story of a client in China that invested extraordinary amounts to protect its secrets, installing fingerprint scanners, limiting Internet access, and filtering outgoing email. Risch, *supra* note 1, at 44.

¹⁰¹ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* 92 (2006) (quoting one cereal company executive as saying: "Recipes are not intellectual property; you can't patent a new cereal. All you can hope for is to have the market to yourself for a few months to establish your brand before a competitor knocks off the product. So we're very careful not to show our hand."). To be fair, this example can cut both ways - apparently cereal companies don't trust trade secret law enough to disclose information. But it is consistent with the idea that companies will opt for excessive secrecy in the absence of what they consider adequate legal protection.

misappropriated.¹⁰² Finally, and most importantly, restrictions on the flow of information between business partners or to new employees slow the process of commercialization and improvement of the secret inventions, and therefore interfere with both the invention and disclosure functions of IP law. Trade secret law developed as a substitute for the physical and contractual restrictions those companies would otherwise impose in an effort to prevent a competitor from acquiring their information. In so doing, it encourages disclosure of information that companies might [*336] otherwise be reluctant to share for fear of losing the competitive advantage it provides.¹⁰³

To be sure, trade secret law still encourages some secrecy. So if the alternative were a world in which companies freely disclosed their inventions, that world might be preferable. But the empirical evidence suggests that is unlikely to be the alternative. Rather, a world without trade secret protection is likely to have more, not less, secrecy.

Trade secret laws can encourage disclosure in a second way as well: they serve as a partial solution to Arrow's Information Paradox.¹⁰⁴ The paradox is this: In the absence of any legal protection, the developer of a potentially valuable but secret idea will have a difficult time selling that idea to someone who could make more efficient use of it. In order to sell the idea he will have to disclose it to allow the buyer to evaluate it, but disclosing it destroys the value inherent in its secrecy. To see this, imagine that I tell you I have a great idea, and I'll share it with you for \$ 1 million. Should you take the deal? You can't know the answer to that question unless I tell you what the idea is. But in the absence of legal protection, if I tell you what my idea is, you no longer need to pay me \$ 1 million.

¹⁰² The reverse can sometimes be true, however. If a single fence can protect a host of secrets that the owner would have to sue individually to protect in court, fencing might be cheaper than legal protection. But when secrets are released to third parties - as most of the good ones generally must be - that becomes less likely.

¹⁰³ See Risch, *supra* note 1, at 42-43. Economists sometimes suggest that a benefit of patents over secrets is that the disclosure of inventions in a patent communicates information to competitors and therefore avoids wasteful duplication of research and development. See, e.g., Steven N.S. Cheung, Property Rights in Trade Secrets, 20 *Econ. Inquiry* 40, 47 (1982); Nancy T. Gallini, Patent Policy and Costly Imitation, 23 *RAND J. Econ.* 52 (1992). I don't find this argument persuasive, however, both because I think parallel research by independent companies can often be valuable, see Lemley, *supra* note 70, and because available evidence suggests that patents do not in fact serve much of a disclosure function. See, e.g., Mark A. Lemley, Ignoring Patents, [2008 Mich. St. L. Rev. 19](#); Note, *supra* note 89.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth J. Arrow, Economic Welfare and the Allocation of Resources for Invention, in *Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, The Rate and Direction of Inventive Activity: Economic and Social Factors* 609, 615 (1962) (arguing that sellers will not disclose information to buyers absent legal protection, and so buyers will be unable to value that information).

Now add trade secret law (or any IP right) to the picture.¹⁰⁵ The existence of a legal right to prevent others from using or disclosing my idea in breach of a confidential relationship allows me to disclose the idea in precontractual negotiations, secure in the knowledge that the other side is not free to take the idea without compensating me.¹⁰⁶ The law, by giving certain rights to the [*337] holder of the secret, allows him to disclose information he would otherwise have been unwilling to share, and therefore permits business negotiations that can lead to commercialization of the invention or sale of the idea, serving both the disclosure and incentive functions of IP law.¹⁰⁷ True, the parties could have entered into a contract limiting what could be done with the information, but the putative buyer may be reluctant to sign such a contract without knowing what they might be limiting themselves from using.¹⁰⁸ Both venture capitalists and Hollywood executives, for example, are notoriously unwilling to sign nondisclosure agreements before reading business plans or movie scripts.¹⁰⁹ Trade secret law reaches beyond contract law by allowing courts to infer the existence of a confidential relationship from circumstances in which transactions might be difficult or impossible without that assumption.¹¹⁰

The fact that trade secret law reduces rather than increases an innovative firm's investment in secrecy answers many of the objections people have offered to trade secret law, in particular Bone's claim that legally induced secrecy will interfere with

¹⁰⁵ There is substantial literature on patents (as opposed to trade secrets) as a way out of Arrow's paradox. See, e.g., James J. Anton & Dennis A. Yao, Expropriation and Inventions: Appropriable Rents in the Absence of Property Rights, 84 Am. Econ. Rev. 190, 190-92 (1994); Paul J. Heald, Transaction Costs and Patent Reform, 23 Santa Clara Computer & High Tech. L.J. 447, 453-54 (2007); Robert P. Merges, A Transactional View of Property Rights, [20 Berkeley Tech. L.J. 1477 \(2005\)](#); Robert P. Merges, Intellectual Property and the Costs of Commercial Exchange: A Review Essay, [93 Mich. L. Rev. 1570, 1590 \(1995\)](#).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. E. Allan Farnsworth, Precontractual Liability and Preliminary Agreements: Fair Dealing and Failed Negotiations, [87 Colum. L. Rev. 217, 267 \(1987\)](#) (discussing efforts to avoid Arrow's paradox by entering into "agreements to agree" and the like).

¹⁰⁷ Thus, Simpson has it backwards to suggest that trade secret law will discourage cooperation between companies. Simpson, *supra* note 1, at 1154-55. It will encourage such cooperation far more than the absence of protection.

¹⁰⁸ One way around this is to sign a contract that agrees to keep the information secret only if it is in fact a trade secret, and to allow the use of public domain information or information already in the buyer's possession. But writing a contract like this merely attempts to re-create between the parties what trade secret law already provides.

¹⁰⁹ See, e.g., Deborah J. Ludewig, Optimizing the Benefits of Term Sheets and Ancillary Agreements, in *Drafting Corporate Agreements 2008*, at 43, 52 (PLI Corp. Law & Practice, Course Handbook Series No. 14397, 2008) ("As practitioners in Silicon Valley are aware, venture capital firms will not execute any form of nondisclosure agreement, except in very rare and unusual circumstances, even though they require prospective investment targets to provide extensive confidential information before a funding event."). But cf. Arthur R. Miller, Common Law Protection for Products of the Mind: An "Idea" Whose Time Has Come, [119 Harv. L. Rev. 703, 714 \(2006\)](#) (asserting without support that this was untrue for a brief period in the 1990s).

¹¹⁰ This was the case in [Smith v. Dravo Corp., 203 F.2d 369 \(7th Cir. 1953\)](#), for instance, in which the court implied a confidential relationship between parties negotiating over the sale of a business, despite the fact that the parties did not sign a nondisclosure agreement. See also [Phillips v. Frey, 20 F.3d 623, 630-32 \(5th Cir. 1994\)](#).

rather than promote innovation. ¹¹¹ Bone's argument is right as far as it goes - companies that keep too much secret may reduce rather than increase aggregate innovation - but for the reasons I outline in this Subpart, that argument is a justification for, not a challenge to, trade secret law.

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C. Channeling Protection Between Patents and Trade Secrets ¹¹²

So far, so good. But at this point the reader might object that, if the goal of trade secret law is to give legal rights over an invention while encouraging its disclosure, we don't really need the secrecy requirement at all. In this vein, a number of scholars have suggested that any investment in protecting trade secrecy is wasted, since the law is requiring companies to spend money in ways that reduce, not increase, the dissemination of ideas. ¹¹³ If the goal of trade secret law is to encourage dissemination by giving the security of a legal right, this argument runs, why not just grant that right to any information, regardless of whether it is secret?

The problem with this argument is that without some basis for defining the legal right, it will sweep too broadly. If I can get ownership rights in any information, no matter how public, the result will be to deter, not promote, the dissemination of that information. Broad legal rights may restrict employee mobility, with negative consequences for the economy. ¹¹⁴ If any idea, no matter how public, is subject to a claim of legal rights, individuals and companies will reasonably worry about using any information they do not themselves develop. If I could sue you for repeating my explanation of trade secret law, the result is not likely to be wide discussion of that explanation, even if I have no intention of actually suing you for discussing my idea. ¹¹⁵ And while we could theoretically substitute a defendant's conduct for proof of secrecy as the basis for entitlement to a legal right, as we saw in Part II, such conduct-based definitions are circular - competition is unfair if it is likely to be defined by courts as unfair - and ultimately empty.

¹¹¹ Bone, *supra* note 4, at 264-72.

¹¹² On the role of legal doctrines in channeling behavior, see generally L.L. Fuller & William R. Perdue Jr., *The Reliance Interest in Contract Damages*, 46 *Yale L.J.* 52 (1936).

¹¹³ Kitch, *supra* note 1, at 698 (suggesting that it makes no sense to require proof of efforts to protect secrets, except perhaps as evidence of the existence of a secret); cf. Friedman et al., *supra* note 1, at 67 (arguing that trade secret protection should be available if, but only if, the costs of legal enforcement are less than the costs of secrecy). Friedman, Landes, and Posner are correct only if the social as well as the private costs of secrecy are taken into account.

One might also include as a variant of this point Bone's argument that we don't need trade secret law because existing legal doctrines of contract, tort, and property already serve those purposes. See Bone, *supra* note 4, at 245-46.

¹¹⁴ Burk & McDonnell, *supra* note 39, at 608-09.

¹¹⁵ I don't.

Granted that we need some definition of the entitlement, why secrecy? The answer, I believe, is that the secrecy requirement serves to channel inventors into the appropriate form of IP protection. Consider three different types of inventions: one that is impossible to conceal once it is in widespread use (think of the wheel or the paper clip), one that is impossible to discern by evaluating the product (think of the formula for Coca-Cola),¹¹⁶ and one that can be [*339] discerned by evaluating the product, but only with difficulty (think of software source code, which is not evident from the object code sold to customers but which might be reverse engineered). In a world with patent law but no trade secret law, companies with inventions in the first category - those who have developed what I will call inherently self-disclosing inventions¹¹⁷ - will turn to patent law if they can. If not, they will be out of luck. If the paper clip were not patentable,¹¹⁸ companies wouldn't be able to keep it secret and still make much profit from it. Their best option would likely be to sell the paper clip and hope to make some profit from brand recognition or first-mover advantages.

Companies with inventions in the second category, by contrast - those who develop inventions that are not transparent to the world, such as chemical processes and some formulas - might well decide to keep an invention secret in the absence of legal protection.¹¹⁹ They may reason that secrecy may give them a greater advantage than patent law, since patents may be held invalid, may be easy to design around,¹²⁰ and in any event will expire within twenty years. Indeed, there is some empirical evidence that they do so - that where secrecy is possible, inventors

¹¹⁶ For purposes of this discussion, I ignore the persistent rumors that the formula for Coca-Cola has in fact been reverse engineered. Courts have treated it as still secret. See [Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Shreveport, Inc. v. Coca-Cola Co., 107 F.R.D. 288, 294 \(D. Del. 1985\)](#).

¹¹⁷ The useful distinction between self-disclosing and non-self-disclosing inventions was developed by Kathy Strandburg in her analysis of the experimental use defense in patent law. See Katherine J. Strandburg, What Does the Public Get? Experimental Use and the Patent Bargain, [2004 Wis. L. Rev. 81, 104-18](#).

¹¹⁸ It was. Indeed, there were many different claimed inventors and even substantial litigation over ownership of the exclusive rights to the paper clip. See, e.g., [Cushman & Denison Mfg. Co. v. Denny, 147 F. 734, 734-35 \(S.D.N.Y. 1906\)](#). And more modern variants are still patented today. See Plastic Paper Clip, U.S. Patent No. 5,179,765 (issued Jan. 8, 1992).

¹¹⁹ Gordon L. Doerfer, The Limits on Trade Secret Law Imposed by Federal Patent and Antitrust Supremacy, 80 Harv. L. Rev. 1432, 1441 (1967) (noting the argument that companies that can successfully keep information secret won't opt for patent law in any event). See also Friedman et al., supra note 1, at 63-64; Risch, supra note 1, at 38 (arguing that the possibility that companies will keep information secret anyway means that the marginal social cost of legal protection for withholding information from the public is "minimal"). As I discuss in the text, I think Risch is right, but does not take this point far enough. It's not just that the possibility of secrecy without protection reduces the net social cost of trade secret law; eliminating the secrecy that would occur without the law is an affirmative social benefit of having trade secret law.

¹²⁰ See Paul M. Janicke & LiLan Ren, Who Wins Patent Infringement Cases?, [34 AIPLA Q.J. 1, 5 \(2006\)](#) (finding that patent owners win only about 25 percent of infringement suits). The doctrine of equivalents exists to deal with the problem of patent claims that are too easy to evade, but its impact on modern patent law is relatively minimal. See John R. Allison & Mark A. Lemley, The (Unnoticed) Demise of the Doctrine of Equivalents, [59 Stan. L. Rev. 955 \(2007\)](#) (documenting the small number of cases in which the patentee wins a doctrine of equivalents argument).

choose it over patent protection.¹²¹ Without trade [*340] secret law, the efforts those companies take to protect their secrets may be excessive, as I discussed in the previous Part. That overinvestment may be specific - protection of a particular idea - or general - imposing too many restrictions on employees and business partners. Either way, the result is both inefficiency from overinvestment in secrecy and the loss of the benefits of public disclosure of information.¹²²

A secrecy requirement provides protection to companies in the second category, not in the first. Thus, it ensures that trade secret law provides legal protection in circumstances in which inventors might otherwise choose excessive secrecy, but denies protection to inventions that companies would not keep secret in the absence of patent protection. By drawing this line, even the secrecy requirement of trade secret law has the surprising effect of reducing, not increasing, the secrecy of inventions.¹²³

What, then, of inventions in the intermediate category? Companies with inventions in this third category might or might not rely on secrecy rather than patent law.¹²⁴ Both approaches have risks. As noted above, patents might be invalid, or easy to evade, and in any event will expire in a set period of time. On the other hand, reliance on secrecy provides only tenuous protection, since the secret could be discerned by reverse engineering or independent development or disclosed by an employee or business partner in the absence of trade secret law. In this case, the effects of introducing trade secret law are ambiguous. If companies in this third category would have opted for secrecy, then the introduction of trade secret law reduces the negative effects of that secrecy for the same reasons it did in the second category. But if they would have opted for patent protection rather than secrecy without law, adding trade secret law might encourage them to keep secret information they would otherwise have patented (and therefore disclosed).

¹²¹ See Petra Moser, *Why Don't Inventors Patent?* (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 13294, 2007). Moser studies over 7000 inventions in the United States and Britain between 1851 and 1915. She finds that as reverse engineering an invention becomes more feasible, inventors are more likely to turn from secrecy to patent protection.

¹²² The same can be said - with some adaptations - of business rather than technical trade secrets. Consider customer information, some of which is readily accessible to the public (phone numbers) and some of which is not (purchasing budget for each customer, likes and dislikes, etc.). In a world without trade secret protection, companies might put too much effort into protecting the latter category of information from disclosure. Unlike technical information disclosed in products, these efforts are likely to take the form of compartmentalization of information within the company or of efforts to prevent salespeople from leaving the company through noncompetition agreements and the like. Trade secret law may substitute for some of those efforts, as it does in California, which forbids restrictions on employee mobility, see [Cal. Bus. & Prof. Code § 16600](#) (West 2008), but allows enforcement of claims to information that is in fact secret. See [Edwards v. Arthur Andersen LLP, 189 P.3d 285 \(Cal. 2008\)](#).

¹²³ See Risch, *supra* note 1, at 43.

¹²⁴ While the example I use here involves computer source code, for simplicity's sake I ignore the fact that software is subject to both patent and copyright protection.

To avoid inadvertently encouraging secrecy rather than disclosure, trade secret law incorporates limits on the scope of the right, notably the defenses of independent development and reverse engineering. As the Supreme Court [*341] suggested in *Kewanee Oil Co. v. Bicron Corp.*, and as commentators have suggested, these defenses weaken the trade secret right sufficiently that it does not entice inventors to choose secrecy over patent protection.¹²⁵ That isn't always true, of course; the inventors of Coca-Cola could have chosen to patent it but didn't. But importantly, weakening trade secrets means that those in the intermediate category are unlikely to choose secrecy over patenting. Taken together, the secrecy requirement and the relative weakness of the trade secret law help ensure that the law protects those who would otherwise rely on secrecy without law, and encourages disclosure in those cases, while not displacing patent law as the means of protection for self-disclosing inventions. Put another way, the secrecy requirement channels particular inventors to the form of IP protection that best achieves the goals of society.

Trade secret law may or may not get this judgment right. The enforcement of trade secrets has costs as well as benefits,¹²⁶ and as with all IP rights, it is hard to know whether we are getting the balance right.¹²⁷ Further, as I suggest below, not every trade secret case fits this framework neatly. But the theory of trade secrets as IP rights coheres, in the sense both that the fundamental features of trade secret law fit quite nicely within the goals and framework of IP law more generally and that the same arguments and concerns that arise in other areas of IP arise in trade secret law. Further, as I will argue, thinking about trade secrets as IP rights can help us to improve the doctrine itself. Resolving those arguments, and striking that balance, is the subject of Part IV.

IV. Implications for Trade Secret Law

How does this understanding of trade secret law translate into policy? As a preliminary matter, the articulation of a solid theoretical basis for trade secret law helps defuse Robert Bone's criticism of the doctrine. Trade secret laws promote the

¹²⁵ [416 U.S. 470, 482-85 \(1974\)](#); see also Paul Goldstein, *Kewanee Oil Co. v. Bicron Corp.*: Notes on a Closing Circle, 1974 Sup. Ct. Rev. 81.

¹²⁶ See Bone, *supra* note 4, at 272-81 (detailing some of those costs). One cost often taxed to trade secrecy - the encouragement of wasteful duplication of inventive effort in races by competitors who don't know that the other is working on the same problem - I do not in fact think qualifies as a cost. First, it is far from clear that "races" to innovate are a bad thing; they can speed up the invention process, see John F. Duffy, *Rethinking the Prospect Theory of Patents*, [71 U. Chi. L. Rev. 439 \(2004\)](#), and they often produce valuable new insights that a single approach would not, see Conigliaro et al., *supra* note 87. Second, as Friedman, Landes, and Posner observe, the prospect of stronger patent protection may encourage racing to a greater extent than legal rights in secrets, as companies spend money in rent seeking. Friedman et al., *supra* note 1, at 65.

¹²⁷ See Chiappetta, *supra* note 1, at 88. For a more general discussion of this problem, see Lemley, *supra* note 47; David McGowan, *Copyright Nonconsequentialism*, [69 Mo. L. Rev. 1 \(2004\)](#).

goals of IP rights more generally, and it is the doctrines specific to trade secret law rather than those borrowed from contract or tort that help it do so.

[*342] Beyond justifying the entire endeavor, the IP theory of trade secret rights has several implications for the development of trade secret doctrine. In this Part, I discuss two primary implications and some other possible lessons theory can provide for practice.

A. The Centrality of Secrecy

One implication of the theory I articulated in Part III is that the requirement of secrecy is not an accident or a mistake. It is a central part of what makes trade secret law work. A significant benefit of thinking of trade secrets as IP rights rather than as unfair competition torts is that it puts the focus of the legal inquiry first and foremost on whether the plaintiff has an IP right at all. The UTSA, for example, defines the legal rights of trade secret owners by requiring the existence of a secret and defining what constitutes a secret.¹²⁸ Doing so prevents plaintiffs from ignoring or glossing over proof of the existence of a trade secret in their effort to prevent what they see as improper use of their information.

This point may seem obvious - of course winning a trade secret case requires the plaintiff to prove the existence of a trade secret. But in fact a number of cases and commentators that have applied the tort theory of trade secrecy have minimized or even ignored that requirement.¹²⁹ The Supreme Court itself led courts astray in *E.I. du Pont de Nemours Powder Co. v. Masland*, where it said that "whether the plaintiffs have any valuable secret or not, the defendant knows the facts, whatever they are, through a special confidence that he accepted. The property may be denied, but the confidence cannot be."¹³⁰ A number of courts applying the Restatement of Torts have followed the lead of the *Masland* dictum, holding that defendants misappropriated trade secrets by acquiring or using a secret by improper means or in breach of a confidential relationship without determining that the information was itself a secret at all. An example is *Smith v. Dravo Corp.*, in

¹²⁸ Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 1(4), 14 U.L.A. 433 (1985).

¹²⁹ That their doing so stems from the tort theory of trade secrets is evident from [Kamin v. Kuhnu, 374 P.2d 912, 918 \(Or. 1962\)](#), which said that "the cases adopting the higher standard of 'commercial morality' emphasize the breach of confidence reposed in the defendant, rather than the existence of the trade secret." See also [FMC Corp. v. Varco Int'l, Inc., 677 F.2d 500, 503 \(5th Cir. 1982\)](#) ("The fact that a trade secret is of such a nature that it can be discovered by experimentation or other fair and lawful means does not deprive its owner of the right to protection from those who would secure possession of it by unfair means." (quoting *K & G Oil Tool & Serv. Co. v. G & G Fishing Tool Serv., 314 S.W.2d 782, 788 (Tex. 1958)*)).

Among commentators arguing against strict application of the secrecy requirement on tort grounds, see William L. O'Brien, Trade Secret Reclamation: An Equitable Approach in a Relative World, 21 J. Marshall J. Computer & Info. L. 227 (2003).

¹³⁰ [244 U.S. 100, 102 \(1917\)](#).

which the defendant had clearly made use of information obtained from the [*343] plaintiff during acquisition negotiations in later entering the market in competition with the plaintiff.¹³¹ The court found liability on the basis of the defendant's admittedly troubling business behavior.¹³² But in doing so, the court elided the distinction between the use of information that was truly secret, such as the plaintiff's confidential patent applications, and information that was readily accessible to the public, such as the dimensions of plaintiff's shipping containers that were already on the market.¹³³

There are a number of other examples. In *United States Sporting Products, Inc. v. Johnny Stewart Game Calls, Inc.*,¹³⁴ for example, the court held that publicly sold, uncopyrightable recordings of bird calls were protectable. The court focused on the labor the plaintiff had put into collecting them, but ignored the fact that they were not secret. In *Rohm & Haas Co. v. Adco Chemical Co.*,¹³⁵ the court ignored the fact that the defendant's alleged secret process was in fact disclosed in a number of industry publications because it found that the defendant did not in fact learn the information from those publications, but instead from the plaintiff. And in *Franke v. Wiltschek*, the Second Circuit elevated this idea to a general rule based on Masland:

It matters not that defendants could have gained their knowledge from a study of the expired patent and plaintiffs' publicly marketed product. The fact is that they did not. Instead they gained it from plaintiffs via their confidential relationship, and in so doing incurred a duty not to use it to plaintiffs' detriment. This duty they have breached.¹³⁶

These courts have departed from the principle of trade secrets as IP rights. Perhaps they are blinded by the defendant's suspicious conduct, or perhaps they view employee mobility itself as suspect. Whatever the reason, they ignore the critical

¹³¹ [203 F.2d 369 \(7th Cir. 1953\)](#).

¹³² The defendant rejected the plaintiff's business proposal on January 30, announced that it would compete the next day, and launched its competing product five days after that. [Id. at 372](#).

¹³³ Indeed, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court later criticized Smith on that basis. [Van Prods. Co. v. Gen. Welding & Fabricating Co., 213 A.2d 769, 779-80 \(Pa. 1965\)](#). For other cases implying duties of confidence, see 1 Milgrim & Bensen, *supra* note 1, §§3.01-.02.

¹³⁴ [865 S.W.2d 214 \(Tex. Ct. App. 1993\)](#).

¹³⁵ [689 F.2d 424 \(3d Cir. 1982\)](#).

¹³⁶ [209 F.2d 493, 495 \(2d Cir. 1953\)](#). Among others, see, for example, [Kamin v. Kuhnuau, 374 P.2d 912 \(Or. 1962\)](#); Note, The "Genetic Message" from the Cornfields of Iowa: Expanding the Law of Trade Secrets, 38 Drake L. Rev. 631 (1989) (describing a similar case involving publicly sold grain). For a discussion of this approach, see, for example, Sandeen, *supra* note 55, at 696-97, 702 ("Trade secret law, prior to the UTSA, arguably overemphasized relationships.").

limit on the scope of that IP right. Doing so risks turning trade secrets from a well-defined legal right that serves the broader purposes of IP law into a standardless, free-roaming right to sue competitors for business conduct that courts or juries might be persuaded to deem objectionable. Secrecy is critical to ensuring that trade secret law does not interfere with robust competition or with the dissemination of new ideas. Courts that ignore that requirement undermine [*344] the purpose of trade secret law.¹³⁷ The dictum of Masland should not only be disregarded but reversed: "The starting point in every case of this sort is not whether there was a confidential relationship, but whether, in fact, there was a trade secret to be misappropriated."¹³⁸ Understanding trade secrets as IP rights, and therefore as premised first and foremost on the existence of such a legal right, will help restore the centrality of the secrecy inquiry.¹³⁹ And as a corollary, it may help ensure that the plaintiff clearly defines what it claims to own, rather than (as happens all too often in practice) falling back on vague hand waving.¹⁴⁰

B. The Relationship Between Trade Secret Law and Other Torts

The importance of secrecy in channeling inventors between patent and non-patent IP protection has a second implication as well. Requiring trade secret plaintiffs to prove that they own real secrets will do little good if those same plaintiffs can turn to other legal doctrines to provide equivalent protection without the requirement of secrecy. Unfortunately, there are a number of state common law doctrines that offer just that prospect. The common law doctrine of breach of confidence, for example, required only proof that something was offered to the defendant in confidence, and that the defendant disclosed that information.¹⁴¹ Other common law doctrines,

¹³⁷ Thus, I disagree with Risch, who argues that competitors should be held liable if they acquire information from the plaintiff even though it was readily accessible from public sources. Risch, *supra* note 1, at 54-55. Nor do I think Risch's position is supported by California law; while California modified the UTSA to make "ready ascertainability" of information a defense, there seems little question that that move merely shifted the burden of proof, and did not change the UTSA rule that secrecy, not merely misappropriation, is a required element of the cause of action. See, e.g., [Fortna v. Martin](#), 323 P.2d 146 (Cal. Ct. App. 1958).

¹³⁸ [Den-Tal-Ez, Inc. v. Siemens Capital Corp.](#), 566 A.2d 1214, 1228 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1989) (citing [Van Prods. Co.](#), 213 A.2d at 780); accord [Patriot Homes, Inc. v. Forest River Hous., Inc.](#), 512 F.3d 412, 415 (7th Cir. 2008).

¹³⁹ [Luigino's, Inc. v. Peterson](#), No. CIV 00-1246, 2002 WL 122389, at 8 (D. Minn. Jan. 28, 2002) (holding that the threshold focus in a trade secret case must be on the existence of "property rights" - that is, on secrecy), *aff'd*, [317 F.3d 909 \(8th Cir. 2003\)](#); Graves, *supra* note 1, at 47 ("A property conception may help convince a court to require a more detailed identification of the claims and thus give the defense a better opportunity to show that the information is in the public domain. If the court views a trade secret as a property right, that right necessarily must have metes and bounds ...").

¹⁴⁰ California is one of the few states to require any specificity in the definition of a trade secret. [Cal. Civ. Proc. Code § 2019.210](#) (West 2008). For an argument for greater specificity, see Julie A. Henderson, Comment, The Specifically Defined Trade Secret: An Approach to Protection, 27 Santa Clara L. Rev. 537 (1987).

¹⁴¹ See, e.g., [Lehman v. Dow Jones & Co.](#), 783 F.2d 285, 299 (2d Cir. 1986) (defining the tort as protecting "information that does not qualify as a trade secret if the information is disclosed in confidence and later used in a manner that breaches the confidence").

including misappropriation,¹⁴² **[*345]** unfair competition,¹⁴³ and unjust enrichment (at least in those states in which it is an independent cause of action),¹⁴⁴ similarly have no elements other than a loose definition of improper conduct.¹⁴⁵ And still other torts, such as interference with contract or "idea submission,"¹⁴⁶ may well overlap almost completely with trade secret claims in particular cases.¹⁴⁷

Trade secret law should preempt these torts when they are applied to protect information that would, if secret, have been protected by trade secret law.¹⁴⁸ That is, a plaintiff who complains of the defendant's use of its information, but who cannot prove that the information is secret, should not be able to rely on one of these torts (or any other common law variants) to bypass the requirement that it prove secrecy. If trade secret law does not preempt these torts, the point of the secrecy requirement will be lost, and with it the benefits of dissemination of new inventions. Companies will be unable to rely on the presence of ideas in the public domain; any information might potentially be **[*346]** subject to one of these torts.¹⁴⁹ As a result, companies

The idea derives from a comment in the original Restatement of Torts to the effect that "although given information is not a trade secret, one who receives the information in a confidential relation or discovers it by improper means may be under some duty not to disclose or use that information." **Restatement of Torts § 757** cmt. b (1939). For a discussion of the doctrine and its relationship to trade secret law, see Pooley, *supra* note 1, § 3.04[4].

¹⁴² [Int'l News Serv. v. Associated Press, 248 U.S. 215 \(1918\)](#).

¹⁴³ See Pooley, *supra* note 1, § 3.04[2] (discussing the tort of unfair competition as a "catchall theoretical rubric").

¹⁴⁴ This is true in Colorado, for example. See [Univ. of Colo. Found., Inc. v. Am. Cyanamid Co., 342 F.3d 1298 \(Fed. Cir. 2003\)](#) (recognizing an independent cause of action for unjust enrichment in Colorado).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. [ConFold Pac., Inc. v. Polaris Indus., Inc., 433 F.3d 952, 957 \(7th Cir. 2006\)](#) (referring to the "bewildering array" of common law claims in the shadow of trade secrecy).

¹⁴⁶ On the latter, see, for example, [Nadel v. Play-by-Play Toys & Novelties, Inc., 208 F.3d 368 \(2d Cir. 2000\)](#); [Desny v. Wilder, 299 P.2d 257 \(Cal. 1956\)](#); Mary LaFrance, Something Borrowed, Something New: The Changing Role of Novelty in Idea Protection Law, [34 Seton Hall L. Rev. 485 \(2004\)](#). For a suggestion that the prior "idea submission" case law has been rolled into modern trade secret law, see Edmund W. Kitch, The Expansion of Trade Secrecy Protection and the Mobility of Management Employees: A New Problem for the Law, [47 S.C. L. Rev. 659, 663 \(1996\)](#).

¹⁴⁷ Compare [Convolve, Inc. v. Compaq Computer Corp., No. 00 CV 5141, 2006 WL 839022](#) (S.D.N.Y. Mar. 31, 2006) (holding that interference claims are preempted under California law), with [Ethylpharm S.A. France v. Bentley Pharms., Inc., 388 F. Supp. 2d 426 \(D. Del. 2005\)](#) (holding that interference claim was not preempted because it is not necessarily coextensive with trade secret protection).

¹⁴⁸ And indeed the UTSA does preempt state torts, with the notable exception of contract law. Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 7, 14 U.L.A. 433 (1985); see also [Digital Envoy, Inc. v. Google, Inc., 370 F. Supp. 2d 1025 \(N.D. Cal. 2005\)](#); [Auto Channel, Inc. v. Speedvision Network, LLC, 144 F. Supp. 2d 784 \(W.D. Ky. 2001\)](#); [R.K. Enters. v. Pro-Comp Mgmt., Inc., 158 S.W.3d 685 \(Ark. 2004\)](#). Contra [PostX Corp. v. Secure Data in Motion, Inc., No. C 02-04483, 2004 WL 2663518](#) (N.D. Cal. Nov. 20, 2004) (holding that unfair competition claim was not preempted). For an argument that the UTSA must be read to preempt the common law torts described in text, see James H. Pooley, The Uniform Trade Secrets Act: [California Civil Code § 3426](#), 1 Santa Clara Computer & High Tech. L.J. 193, 209 (1985).

¹⁴⁹ See [ConFold Pac., Inc., 433 F.3d at 959](#) ("If information is not a trade secret and is not protected by ... a broader intellectual property right ... , anyone is free to use the information without liability."). But see Julie Piper, Comment, I Have a Secret?: Applying

will be less willing to compete vigorously on the merits. Departing employees will be less willing to rely on information in the public domain to start new companies, and as a result more reluctant at the margins to start those companies. As Jim Pooley notes, "there is arguably little social utility" in allowing state claims based on misappropriation of trade secrets to go forward if the plaintiff cannot prove the elements of a trade secret claim.¹⁵⁰

Trade secret law should not, however, preempt state laws that have as an object something other than the protection of information. A defendant who breaks into an office to steal information has committed a tort (and indeed a crime) regardless of whether the information in question was secret. Trade secret law should preempt laws within the same general scope as trade secrecy, but not laws that serve fundamentally different purposes.¹⁵¹

Once again, conceiving of trade secrets as IP rights helps achieve the goal of preemption of conflicting common law torts.¹⁵² If trade secret law is one tort among many common law torts, there is no reason to privilege it over other torts when the two conflict.¹⁵³ But we have a well-established set of principles by which IP rights preempt state common law rules that interfere with those [*347] rights.¹⁵⁴ We

the Uniform Trade Secrets Act to Confidential Information That Does Not Rise to the Level of Trade Secret Status, [12 Marq. Intell. Prop. L. Rev. 359 \(2008\)](#) (arguing for protection of information that doesn't qualify as a trade secret).

¹⁵⁰ Pooley, *supra* note 1, § 3.04[4], 3-43 to -44. This is why I believe Bone has it backwards to suggest that a world without trade secret law, but with common law torts, would give greater freedom to reverse engineering, independent development, and employee mobility. See Robert G. Bone, Exploring the Boundaries of Competitive Secrecy: An Essay on the Limits of Trade Secret Law, in *Law, Information & Information Technology* 99, 121-23 (Eli Lederman & Ron Shapira eds., 2001). Trade secret law has limits, and can supplant the application of common law torts that lack those limits.

¹⁵¹ Admittedly, drawing this line will not always be easy. Privacy torts, for instance, might reasonably be cast as serving purposes unrelated to the control of information, but they also serve to restrict access to secret information, and one can imagine plaintiffs using privacy torts to substitute for a failed trade secret case. The analysis in these borderline cases should probably be case-by-case, rather than categorical. That is, rather than preempting privacy law altogether, trade secret law should preempt applications of that law that interfere with the purposes of trade secrecy.

¹⁵² See Graves, *supra* note 1, at 56.

¹⁵³ Indeed, some courts applying the tort theory have allowed claims for misappropriation to proceed where trade secret claims failed, even in jurisdictions in which the UTSA seems clearly to foreclose application of those torts. See, e.g., [Imax Corp. v. Cinema Techs., Inc.](#), 152 F.3d 1161, 1169 (9th Cir. 1998); [City Solutions, Inc. v. Clear Channel Commc'ns, Inc.](#), 242 F. Supp. 2d 720, 735 (N.D. Cal. 2003), *aff'd* in relevant part, 365 F.3d 835, 842 (9th Cir. 2004); [Burbank Grease Servs., Inc. v. Sokolowski](#), 717 N.W.2d 781 (Wis. 2006). But see [Mortgage Specialists, Inc. v. Davey](#), 904 A.2d 652 (N.H. 2006) (rejecting Burbank Grease). For criticism of these cases based on lack of uniformity, see Sarah Gettings, *Burbank Grease Services, LLC v. Sokolowski: Frustrating Uniformity in Trade Secret Law*, [22 Berkeley Tech. L.J. 423 \(2007\)](#).

¹⁵⁴ See, e.g., [Bonito Boats, Inc. v. Thunder Craft Boats, Inc.](#), 489 U.S. 141 (1989); [Compco Corp. v. Day-Brite Lighting, Inc.](#), 376 U.S. 234 (1964); [Sears, Roebuck & Co. v. Stiffel Co.](#), 376 U.S. 225, 229 (1964); Paul Heald, *Federal Intellectual Property Law and the Economics of Preemption*, [76 Iowa L. Rev. 959 \(1991\)](#); Rice, *supra* note 31; John Shepard Wiley Jr., *Bonito Boats: Uninformed But Mandatory Innovation Policy*, 1989 Sup. Ct. Rev. 283. For a detailed discussion of those rules as applied to trade secret law, see Sharon K. Sandeen, *A Contract by Any Other Name Is Still a Contract: Examining the Effectiveness of Trade Secret Clauses to Protect Databases*, [45 IDEA 119 \(2005\)](#).

have those preemption principles because we recognize IP rights as utilitarian rules created by government to address public-goods problems, and the policy decisions implicit in those rules will at a minimum be complicated and may even be overridden by layering on additional causes of action not designed with public goods problems in mind. The *Compco* and *Sears* cases provide IP examples of how this can work.¹⁵⁵ While those cases involved federal Supremacy Clause preemption of state laws, there are state-level examples as well.¹⁵⁶ Most notably, the California Supreme Court held that California's unfair competition statute could not be applied to undo the limits of the Cartwright Act, the state's antitrust law.¹⁵⁷ The rationale was the same as it is here - applying a general, open-ended tort to override the specific limits of a statutory policy defeats the purpose of that policy. Treating trade secret law as an IP right dependent on proof of secrecy highlights the policy stakes, and will encourage courts to preempt common law claims that threaten to undermine the balance trade secret law strikes.¹⁵⁸ In so doing, it may further [*348] advance the trade secret policy of disclosure by removing state laws that block the flow of non-trade secret information.

C. Other Implications for Trade Secret Doctrine

Besides the centrality of secrecy to trade secret law, and the attendant need to preempt torts that undermine that requirement, an IP theory of trade secret law may have other implications for trade secret doctrine as well. The implications I discuss in this Subpart are more speculative; they represent not necessary implications of

¹⁵⁵ [Compco Corp., 376 U.S. at 234](#); [Sears, Roebuck & Co., 376 U.S. at 229](#). Doug Lichtman has criticized the preemption of state IP-like rights. Douglas Gary Lichtman, The Economics of Innovation: Protecting Unpatentable Goods, [81 Minn. L. Rev. 693 \(1997\)](#). But his argument is based on narrowly tailored state laws that serve only to recoup development costs. Trade secret may fit that model; amorphous notions of misappropriation and unfair competition do not.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Dan L. Burk, Protection of Trade Secrets in Outer Space Activity: A Study in Federal Preemption, 23 Seton Hall L. Rev. 560 (1993) (discussing the possibility of federal preemption of state law in a territory where federal law is exclusive).

¹⁵⁷ [Cel-Tech Commc'ns v. L.A. Cellular Tel. Co., 973 P.2d 527 \(Cal. 1999\)](#) (holding that state antitrust law preempts allegations of unfair competition between competitors unless those allegations are sufficient to state an antitrust claim).

¹⁵⁸ See [AcryMed, Inc. v. ConvaTec, 317 F. Supp. 2d 1204, 1217 \(D. Or. 2004\)](#); [Automed Techs., Inc. v. Eller, 160 F. Supp. 2d 915, 921-22 \(N.D. Ill. 2001\)](#); [Auto Channel, Inc. v. Speedvision Network, LLC, 144 F. Supp. 2d 784, 790 \(W.D. Ky. 2001\)](#); [Frantz v. Johnson, 999 P.2d 351, 358 n.4 \(Nev. 2000\)](#); Pooley, supra note 1, § 2.03[6]. But see [Hecny Transp., Inc. v. Chu, 430 F.3d 402 \(7th Cir. 2005\)](#) (refusing to preempt theft and fraud claims); [Boeing Co. v. Sierracin Corp., 738 P.2d 665, 673-74 \(Wash. 1987\)](#) (en banc) (refusing to preempt breach of confidence claim); [Burbank Grease Servs., Inc., 717 N.W.2d 781](#) (refusing to preempt misappropriation claim). The UTSA expressly preempts other state claims. Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 7, 14 U.L.A. 433 (1985). But common law courts have done so as well. See [Sheets v. Yamaha Motors Corp., U.S.A., 849 F.2d 179, 184 \(5th Cir. 1988\)](#) ("Sheets is not entitled to fall back on the equitable doctrine of unjust enrichment after failing to establish a trade secret."); [Gary Van Zeeland Talent, Inc. v. Sandas, 267 N.W.2d 242, 249 \(Wis. 1978\)](#). Sharon Sandeen argues that federal law should step in to preempt some of these state claims notwithstanding *Kewanee*. Sharon K. Sandeen, *Kewanee Revisited: Returning to First Principles of Intellectual Property Law to Determine the Issue of Federal Preemption*, [12 Marq. Intell. Prop. L. Rev. 299, 355-57 \(2008\)](#). That shouldn't be necessary if the UTSA will do the job, except perhaps in states that still apply common law doctrines.

the IP theory of trade secrets, but legal doctrines that seem to fit uneasily with the IP theory or that are likely to draw greater sustenance from that theory.

1. Reasonable efforts to protect secrecy

First, while proof that the plaintiff's information is secret serves a critical role in channeling towards trade secret protection only those inventions that are best served by trade secret law, the same is not necessarily true of the parallel requirement that trade secret owners take reasonable efforts to protect their secrets.¹⁵⁹ That requirement seems to stem from traditional tort notions of contributory negligence, under which plaintiffs were barred from relief if they themselves contributed to the tort.¹⁶⁰ The explanation I have offered for trade secret law (and for the secrecy requirement) is not one that values secrecy as an end in itself; far from it. The benefit of trade secret law is that it reduces investment in secrecy compared to what would happen absent that law. So there is no reason we should want to establish a minimum investment level as **[*349]** an end in itself.¹⁶¹ And it may have negative consequences in particular circumstances.¹⁶²

The question then becomes whether reasonable efforts serve some other end. For example, some courts suggest that efforts to protect information as a secret are a sufficiently strong proxy for the secrecy of the invention that we should rely on them as evidence in support of the existence of a secret.¹⁶³ But they are surely not perfect evidence; any litigator will tell you that companies regularly label as secret lots of things that clearly are not secret. Even assuming that reasonable efforts at secrecy do offer such evidence, that doesn't justify the imposition of reasonable efforts as a separate requirement, just the consideration of that evidence in the overall secrecy inquiry. Alternatively, it may be that efforts to protect secrecy serve to put potential

¹⁵⁹ On that requirement, see Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 1(4)(ii); [Rockwell Graphic Sys., Inc. v. DEV Indus., Inc., 925 F.2d 174 \(7th Cir. 1991\)](#); [Electro-Craft Corp. v. Controlled Motion, Inc., 332 N.W.2d 890 \(Minn. 1983\)](#).

¹⁶⁰ See, e.g., Elizabeth A. Rowe, Rethinking "Reasonable Efforts" To Protect Trade Secrets in a Digital World 38 (July 19, 2008) (unpublished manuscript), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1161166> (relying on a tort conception of trade secrecy to justify strengthening the reasonable efforts requirement in the online environment).

¹⁶¹ See, e.g., Kitch, *supra* note 1, at 698. One author has argued that "courts should require firms to invest in precautionary measures until the marginal cost of those measures equals the marginal expected economic loss in the event of misappropriation." Note, Trade Secret Misappropriation: A Cost-Benefit Response to the Fourth Amendment Analogy, [106 Harv. L. Rev. 461, 473 \(1992\)](#). But that makes no sense. It would essentially require dissipation of all the rents that might be gained from protecting trade secrets. This leads to the conclusion that any expenditure on secrecy is wasteful unless it serves some identifiable social purpose.

¹⁶² See, e.g., Harry Wingo, Dumpster Diving and the Ethical Blindspot of Trade Secret Law, [16 Yale L. & Pol'y Rev. 195 \(1997\)](#) (arguing that "dumpster diving" for discarded secrets should be illegal regardless of the efforts to prevent it, albeit on a "commercial morality" theory).

¹⁶³ [Rockwell Graphic Sys., Inc., 925 F.2d at 178](#).

defendants on notice of the claim of secrecy, and therefore prevent inadvertent misappropriation. This may be true of some, but not all, efforts at secrecy, so again, it seems to justify reasonable efforts only as evidence, not as a separate requirement. More to the point, it will be true only as to some defendants; others may be aware of the secrecy of the information they take whether or not those secrets were reasonably protected. It seems more logical to cabin the risk of liability for inadvertent misappropriation by imposing some kind of scienter requirement than through this kind of constructive notice through enforcement efforts. ¹⁶⁴

Reasonable efforts to protect secrecy, then, may make sense as evidence of secrecy or even as evidence of scienter, but they probably don't make sense as a separate requirement. In this case it is the Restatements that have it right and the UTSA that has it wrong; both the Restatement of Torts and the Restatement [*350] of Unfair Competition treat reasonable efforts solely as evidence of secrecy, while the UTSA treats them as a separate condition for protection. ¹⁶⁵

2. Contracting around trade secret law

A second possible implication of an IP theory of trade secret rights involves efforts to contract around those rights. Just as treating trade secrets as IP rights makes preemption of conflicting tort laws more feasible by highlighting the policy purposes trade secret laws serve, it raises the question of whether trade secret rules are merely default rules that the parties can contract around, or whether they are policy judgments that courts should not allow the parties to undermine. There is a similar debate in copyright law, where courts have split on the question of whether parties can contract to prevent reverse engineering of software despite copyright rules that make reverse engineering legal under most circumstances. ¹⁶⁶ In trade secret law,

¹⁶⁴ Trade secret law does have such a requirement, though it rarely becomes an issue, probably because the requirement of misappropriation by improper means limits the number of cases in which defendants act in good faith but still meet the test for infringement. See [Rohm & Haas Co. v. Adco Chem. Co., 689 F.2d 424, 433 n.9 \(3d Cir. 1982\)](#) (imposing a negligence requirement as to whether the information taken constituted a secret and concluding that "[a] good faith belief, even if credited, is no defense to an action for misappropriation of trade secrets"); Pooley, *supra* note 1, § 6.04[1], 6-30 ("Knowledge on the part of the defendant is an element of liability for misappropriation.").

¹⁶⁵ Compare [Restatement of Torts § 757](#) cmt. b (1939) (including "the extent of measures taken by [the claimant] to guard the secrecy of the information" among six factors to be considered in determining whether information is secret), and [Restatement \(Third\) of Unfair Competition § 39](#) cmt. g (1995) ("Precautions taken to maintain the secrecy of information are relevant in determining whether the information qualifies for protection as a trade secret," but "if the value and secrecy of the information are clear, evidence of specific precautions taken by the trade secret owner may be unnecessary."), with Unif. Trade Secrets Act § 1(4)(ii), 14 U.L.A 433 (1985) (requiring "efforts that are reasonable under the circumstances to maintain secrecy" as an element of proof of a trade secret).

¹⁶⁶ On the copyright rule permitting reverse engineering, see, for example, [Sony Computer Entm't, Inc. v. Connectix Corp., 203 F.3d 596 \(9th Cir. 2000\)](#); [Sega Enters. Ltd. v. Accolade, Inc., 977 F.2d 1510 \(9th Cir. 1992\)](#); Julie E. Cohen, Reverse Engineering

this comes up in three significant contexts: efforts to contract around the requirement of secrecy itself, whether in business disputes or in restrictive employee covenants;¹⁶⁷ efforts to [*351] ban reverse engineering by contract;¹⁶⁸ and the question of whether a confidential relationship can be implied absent a contract.¹⁶⁹ In each case, there are substantial policy interests that underlie the choice of trade secret rules. Indeed, in the case of secrecy itself, they are fundamental to the point of trade secret law. Accordingly, my inclination is to prevent parties from opting out of particular rules of trade secret law, at least to the extent they rely on trade secret rather than contract remedies.¹⁷⁰ This limits the power of trade secret owners in some cases - reverse engineering and secrecy - but strengthens their power in others - implied confidential relationships. Understanding trade secrets as IP rights won't resolve this debate, any more than it has in the copyright context. But it will make it clear that there must be a debate, and that it must be conducted with trade

and the Rise of Electronic Vigilantism: Intellectual Property Implications of "Lock-Out" Programs, [68 S. Cal. L. Rev. 1091 \(1995\)](#); Philip J. Weiser, The Internet, Innovation, and Intellectual Property Policy, [103 Colum. L. Rev. 534 \(2003\)](#). On the question of whether parties can contract around this rule, compare [Vault Corp. v. Quaid Software Ltd., 847 F.2d 255 \(5th Cir. 1988\)](#) (answering no) with [Davidson & Assocs. v. Jung, 422 F.3d 630 \(8th Cir. 2005\)](#) (answering yes) and [Bowers v. Baystate Techs., Inc., 320 F.3d 1316 \(Fed. Cir. 2003\)](#) (answering yes). See Mark A. Lemley, Beyond Preemption: The Law and Policy of Intellectual Property Licensing, [87 Cal. L. Rev. 111 \(1999\)](#).

¹⁶⁷ Compare [Celeritas Techs., Ltd. v. Rockwell Int'l Corp., 150 F.3d 1354, 1358 \(Fed. Cir. 1998\)](#) (finding breach of contract in use of information that was in the public domain), [Warner-Lambert Pharm. Co. v. John J. Reynolds, Inc., 178 F. Supp. 655 \(S.D.N.Y. 1959\)](#) (holding that parties could agree to treat information as secret even after it was published), [Bernier v. Merrill Air Eng'rs, 770 A.2d 97 \(Me. 2001\)](#) (holding that employee violated nondisclosure agreement by publishing non-secret information), and [Simplified Telesys, Inc. v. Live Oak Telecom, LLC, 68 S.W.3d 688, 693-94 \(Tex. App. 2000\)](#), with [Sarkes Tarzian, Inc. v. Audio Devices, Inc., 166 F. Supp. 250, 265-66 \(S.D. Cal. 1958\)](#), aff'd, [283 F.2d 695 \(9th Cir. 1960\)](#), [Am. Paper & Packaging Prods., Inc. v. Kirgan, 228 Cal. Rptr. 713, 717 \(Ct. App. 1986\)](#) ("An agreement between employer and employee defining a trade secret may not be decisive in determining whether the court will so regard it."), [Electro-Craft Corp. v. Controlled Motion, Inc., 332 N.W.2d 890, 903 \(Minn. 1983\)](#) (same), and [Gary Van Zeeland Talent, Inc. v. Sandas, 267 N.W.2d 242 \(Wis. 1978\)](#). For a detailed discussion, see Sandeen, supra note 154.

¹⁶⁸ See, e.g., [Technicon Data Sys. Corp. v. Curtis 1000, Inc., 244 U.S.P.Q. 286, 1984 Del. Ch. LEXIS 588](#) (Aug. 21, 1984); [Data Gen. Corp. v. Digital Computer Controls, Inc., 357 A.2d 105 \(Del. Ch. 1975\)](#). For further discussion, see Rice, supra note 31, at 623-25 (arguing for preemption of contractual restrictions on the reverse engineering of trade secrets in most cases).

¹⁶⁹ See, e.g., [Phillips v. Frey, 20 F.3d 623, 631-32 \(5th Cir. 1994\)](#) (implying a confidential relationship between negotiating parties absent a confidentiality agreement); [Smith v. Dravo Corp., 203 F.2d 369 \(7th Cir. 1953\)](#) (same). But see [Bateman v. Mnemonics, Inc., 79 F.3d 1532 \(11th Cir. 1996\)](#) (noting that the court was "wary" of implied confidential relationships because of the potential for abuse); cf. [Omnitech Int'l v. Clorox Co., 11 F.3d 1316 \(5th Cir. 1994\)](#) (holding that it was not illegal for a company to use trade secret to evaluate company for purchase where parties did not sign nondisclosure agreement).

¹⁷⁰ As Jim Pooley puts it:

The law relating to trade secrets reflects a balance of public and private interests in the encouragement of innovation, the preservation of ethics and the maintenance of a free marketplace of ideas and movement of labor. This balance should not be upset in any given transaction by private understandings between the parties.

Pooley, supra note 1, § 3.04[3], 3-38 to -39; see also [Restatement \(Third\) of Unfair Competition § 41](#) cmt. d (1995); 1 Milgrim & Bensen, supra note 1, § 4.02[1][b] ("The mere presence of a confidentiality agreement does not elevate nontrade secret matter to trade secret status."); Rice, supra note 31, at 623.

secret policy in mind. ¹⁷¹ And it may strengthen the hand of those who argue that there is more at stake here than just the agreement of two private parties. ¹⁷²

3. IP, property, and "absolute dominion"

Third, the theoretical underpinnings of trade secret law bear on the relationship between the IP conception of trade secrets and the freedom of others to use information to compete. A number of scholars suggest that **[*352]** conceiving of trade secrets as property rights will lead to stronger protection for trade secrets, at the expense of employee mobility and robust competition, and perhaps even of free speech. ¹⁷³ Conceiving of trade secrets as IP rights may affect the way that other laws, such as antitrust, interact with trade secret law. ¹⁷⁴ Others worry that a property conception of trade secrets - and perhaps therefore an IP conception - will cause courts to gloss over the First Amendment and afford less protection to journalists or whistleblowers. ¹⁷⁵ In fact, however, I suggest in this Article that conceiving of trade secrets as IP rights has the opposite effect - it encourages courts to focus on the requirements and limits of trade secret law, particularly when compared to the standardless theories of unfair competition and unjust enrichment that seem the most obvious alternatives. ¹⁷⁶ In doing so, it is more likely to promote economic efficiency than any competing approach. ¹⁷⁷ Nor does conceiving of trade secrets as IP rights mean that they are unlimited, or that the First Amendment must give way; I have explained elsewhere why the First Amendment cannot give way merely because "property" is at stake. ¹⁷⁸

4. How long does secrecy last?

¹⁷¹ While it is possible that contract law itself could reach this result through doctrines like unconscionability or mutual mistake, the law is more likely to get the policy judgment right if it is expressly considering trade secret policy.

¹⁷² See, e.g., Alan E. Garfield, Promises of Silence: Contract Law and Freedom of Speech, [83 Cornell L. Rev. 261, 303-06 \(1998\)](#); Lemley, supra note 166.

¹⁷³ See, e.g., Geraldine Szott Moohr, The Problematic Role of Criminal Law in Regulating the Use of Information: The Case of the Economic Espionage Act, [80 N.C. L. Rev. 853 \(2002\)](#); Pamela Samuelson, Principles for Resolving Conflicts Between Trade Secrets and the First Amendment, [58 Hastings L.J. 777, 807 \(2007\)](#); Simpson, supra note 1.

¹⁷⁴ For example, Katarzyna Czapracka suggests that the E.U. antitrust authorities give less deference to trade secret claims than their U.S. counterparts because the European Union has no conception of trade secrets as property rights. Katarzyna A. Czapracka, Antitrust and Trade Secrets: The U.S. and the EU Approach, 24 Santa Clara Computer & High Tech. L.J. 207 (2008).

¹⁷⁵ On the potential conflict between trade secrets and the First Amendment, see, for example, Mark A. Lemley & Eugene Volokh, Freedom of Speech and Injunctions in Intellectual Property Cases, [48 Duke L.J. 147, 229-32 \(1998\)](#); Samuelson, supra note 173.

¹⁷⁶ See, e.g., Graves, supra note 1.

¹⁷⁷ Chally, supra note 1, at 1280-82.

¹⁷⁸ Lemley & Volokh, supra note 175, at 182-85 (debunking the argument that "property" is entitled to any special deference under the First Amendment).

The final implication is also the most speculative: it may be that an IP theory of trade secrets suggests that there should be a term limit on trade secret protection. Patents and (at least until recently) copyrights¹⁷⁹ expire after a set term of years. Trade secrets, by contrast, are protected for an indefinite term, until they are no longer secret.¹⁸⁰ The theory is that the possibility of publication of the secret, whether by malfeasance or by independent development or reverse engineering, means that the secret is fragile, and that **[*353]** over time it is likely to be revealed to the world. But it is not clear that this indefinite term properly strikes the balance between providing incentives to invent and ensuring that the world benefits from the new invention. It may be that after a certain period of time the additional incentive from the prospect of secrecy is marginal, while the costs of maintaining secrecy are not. Coca-Cola, for example, surely did not count on over a century of trade secret protection when it made the choice between patent and trade secret law. One possible implication of treating trade secrets as IP rights, then, is that the law should provide that trade secrets "expire" after a certain period.¹⁸¹ Certainly, an IP view of trade secret rights requires us to give thought to striking the right balance between encouraging innovation and unduly limiting disclosure, a question that - whatever its proper resolution - might not arise at all under a different conception of trade secrecy. That doesn't mean we should define a term for trade secrets. It may be too hard to decide on a start date, and therefore an end date, and compelling disclosure of information at the end of the term may also prove problematic. But thinking of trade secrets as IP rights at least gives us a perspective from which to think about the question.

Conclusion

Trade secrets are IP rights. They serve the same purposes as patent and copyright law - they encourage innovation and the disclosure and dissemination of that innovation, though they sometimes serve those purposes in surprising ways. Trade secret law reduces investments in secrecy and encourages the dissemination of the secret to more people who can make productive use of it. Indeed, trade secret rights may serve the purposes of IP law better than more traditional IP rights, at least for certain classes of inventions. The public disclosure function of the patent system

¹⁷⁹ While copyrights theoretically expire, a series of eleven term extensions has meant that almost no copyrights have expired since 1961. Cf. [Eldred v. Ashcroft, 537 U.S. 186 \(2003\)](#) (upholding the legality of these term extensions).

¹⁸⁰ See Merges et al., *supra* note 8, at 58.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Simpson, *supra* note 1, at 1156-58 (arguing for a defense applicable to secrets that cannot be reverse engineered, and so might last forever). This isn't a necessary implication; trademarks are similarly protected for an indefinite term so long as they are used in commerce and renewed every ten years. [15 U.S.C. § 1059](#) (2000).

doesn't work very well in most industries, and doesn't work at all if inventors opt out of the patent system.

Understanding trade secrets as IP rights allows them to take their proper place in the pantheon of social policy designed to encourage innovation. It also gives us a way to think about how those rights are designed, a way that has significant implications for how trade secret law looks and how it interacts with other laws. Most surprisingly, those implications are ones that offer greater, not lesser, latitude for competitors and departing employees than the unfair competition rationale most commonly articulated as an alternative.

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