Atkins v. Virginia

536 U.S. 304 (2002)

Country: United States
Region: Americas
Year: 2002
Court: Supreme Court
Health Topics: Mental health, Prisons
Human Rights: Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, Right to due process/fair trial

Facts

The Appellant, Atkins, a mentally disabled individual, was convicted of capital murder and related crimes by a Virginia jury and sentenced to death. He brought this appeal alleging that he could not be sentenced to death because executing the mentally disabled would constitute â€œcruel and unusual punishmentâ€• as prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

Decision and Reasoning

The Court examined whether the execution of the mentally disabled person constituted cruel and unusual punishment prohibited by the Eighth Amendment. The Court held that in light of â€œevolving standards of decencyâ€• executions of mentally disabled criminals were excessive and constituted cruel and unusual punishment as prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

The Court held that the justifications for the death penalty, deterrence and retribution, did not apply to mentally disabled offenders in the same way they did for other offenders. It explained that â€œthe cognitive and behavioral impairments that [made mentally retarded] defendants less morally culpable, for example, the diminished ability to understand and process information, to learn from experience, to engage in logical reasoning, or to control impulses, . . . [made] it less likely that they [could] process the information of the possibility of execution as a penalty and, as a result, control their conduct based upon that information.â€• The Court stated that exempting the mentally disabled from execution would not lessen the death penalty's deterrent effect with respect to offenders who were not mentally disabled. With respect to retribution, the Court held that â€œ the severity of the appropriate punishment necessarily depend[ed] on the culpability of the offender,â€• and that the lesser culpability of the mentally disabled offender did not merit â€œthe most extreme sanction available to the State.â€• The Court added that its â€œnarrowing jurisprudenceâ€• sought to ensure that or the most deserving of execution were put to death, and thus an â€œexclusion for the mentally disabled [was] appropriate.â€•

Secondly, the Court explained that mentally disabled defendants faced â€œa special risk of wrongful executionâ€• for a variety of reasons. These included: their diminished ability to â€œmake a persuasive showing of mitigation in the face of prosecutorial evidence of one or more aggravating factorsâ€•; their lesser ability to give their counsel meaningful assistance; that they might unwittingly confess to crimes they did notÂ commit; and the facts that they were typically poor witnesses and that their demeanor might create an â€œunwarranted impression of lack of remorse for their crimes.â€•

The Court was also persuaded by findings that State legislatures had taken a â€œdramatic shiftâ€• toward the position that the death penalty was not a suitable punishment for mentally disabled criminals. It noted that the execution of mentally disabled offenders had become a â€œtruly unusualâ€• practice and that â€œa national consen [had] developed against it.â€•

Decision Excerpts

â€œIn light of these deficiencies, our death penalty jurisprudence provides two reasons consistent with the legislative consensus that the mentally retarded should be categorically excluded from execution. First, there is a serious question as to whether either justification that we have recognized as a basis for the death penalty applies to mentally retarded offenders. Gregg v. Georgia, 428 U. S. 153, 183 (1976) (joint opinion of Stewart, Powell, and Stevens, JJ.), identified â€˜retribution and deterrence of capital crimes by prospective

offendersâ€™ as the social purposes served by the death penalty. Unless the imposition of the death penalty on a mentally retarded person â€˜measurably contributes to one or both of these goals, it â€˜is nothing more than the purposeless and needless imposition of pain and suffering,â€™ and hence an unconstitutional punishment.â€™ Enmund, 458 U. S., at 798.â€• 536 U.S., pp. 318 - 319

â€œWith respect to retributionâ€”the interest in seeing that the offender gets his â€˜just desertsâ€™â€”the severity o appropriate punishment necessarily depends on the culpability of the offender. Since Gregg, our jurisprudence has consistently confined the imposition of the death penalty to a narrow category of the most serious crimes. For example, in Godfrey v. Georgia, 446 U. S. 420 (1980), we set aside a death sentence because the petitioner's crimes did not reflect â€˜a consciousness materially more `depraved' than that of any person guilty of murder.â€™ Id., at 433. If the culpability of the average murderer is insufficient to justify the most extreme sanction available to the State, the lesser culpability of the mentally retarded offender surely does not merit that form of retribution. Thus, pursuant to our narrowing jurisprudence, which seeks to ensure that only the most deserving of execution are put to death, an exclusion for the mentally retarded is appropriate.â€• 536 U.S., pp. 319

â€œWith respect to deterrenceâ€”the interest in preventing capital crimes by prospective offendersâ€”â€˜it seems lik that â€˜capital punishment can serve as a deterrent only when murder is the result of premeditation and deliberation,â€™â€™ Enmund, 458 U. S., at 799. Exempting the mentally retarded from that punishment will not affe the â€˜cold calculus that precedes the decisionâ€™ of other potential murderers. Gregg, 428 U. S., at 186. Indeed, that sort of calculus is at the opposite end of the spectrum from behavior of mentally retarded offenders. The theory of deterrence in capital sentencing is predicated upon the notion that the increased severity of the punishment will inhibit criminal actors from carrying out murderous conduct. Yet it is the same cognitive and behavioral impairments that make these defendants less morally culpableâ€”for example, the diminished ability to understand and process information, to learn from experience, to engage in logical reasoning, or to control impulsesâ€”that also make it less likely that they can process the information of the possibility of execution as a penalty and, as a result, control their conduct based upon that information. Nor will exempting the mentally retarded from execution lessen the deterrent effect of the death penalty with respect to offenders who are not mentally retarded. Such individuals are unprotected by the exemption and will continue to face the threat of execution. Thus, executing the mentally retarded will not measurably further the goal of deterrence.â€• 536 U.S., pp. 319 - 320

â€œThe reduced capacity of mentally retarded offenders provides a second justification for a categorical rule making such offenders ineligible for the death penalty. The risk â€˜that the death penalty will be imposed in spite of factors which may call for a less severe penalty,â€™ Lockett v. Ohio, 438 U. S. 586, 605 (1978), is enhanced, not only by the possibility of false confessions, but also by the lesser ability of mentally retarded defendants to make a persuasive showing of litigation in the face of prosecutorial evidence of one or more aggravating factors. Mentally retarded defendants may be less able to give meaningful assistance to their counsel and are typically poor witnesses, and their demeanor may create an unwarranted impression of lack of remorse for their crimes. As Penry demonstrated, moreover, reliance on mental retardation as a mitigating factor can be a two-edged sword that may enhance the likelihood that the aggravating factor of future dangerousness will be found by the jury. 492 U. S., at 323-325. Mentally retarded defendants in the aggregate face a special risk of wrongful execution.â€• 536 U.S., pp. 320 - 321