

No. 97248-6  
COA No. 77662-2-I

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

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STATE OF WASHINGTON,

Respondent,

v.

CHRISTOPHER RONNELL AUSLER,

Petitioner.

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ON APPEAL FROM THE SUPERIOR COURT OF  
THE STATE OF WASHINGTON FOR KING COUNTY

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PETITION FOR REVIEW

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### RULES

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A. IDENTITY OF PETITIONER

Christopher Ausler asks this Court to accept review of the Court of Appeals decision terminating review designated in part B of this petition.

B. COURT OF APPEALS DECISION

Pursuant to RAP 13.4(b), petitioner seeks review of the unpublished Court of Appeals decision in *State v. Christopher Ronnell Ausler*, No. 77662-2-I (April 22, 2019). A copy of the decision is in the Appendix.

C. ISSUE PRESENTED FOR REVIEW

Under the Due Process Clauses of the Washington and United States Constitutions, a defendant is guaranteed the right to a fair trial. Prosecutorial misconduct in closing argument, which prejudices the defendant, violates that right to a fair trial and requires reversal of the convictions. Here, over Mr. Ausler's repeated objections, the prosecutor misstated and shifted the State's burden of proof and appealed to the jury's passion and prejudice. Is a significant issue under the United States and Washington Constitutions presented where the prosecutor's argument constituted prejudicial misconduct requiring reversal of Mr. Ausler's conviction?

#### D. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On March 13, 2015, a clerk at the Seahurst Post Office was presented for refund six spoiled postage strips containing postage that had been created from a Pitney Bowes postage machine. RP 790-95. The strips were in amounts between \$75 and \$80 and had been created from a meter located at Recovery Centers in Kent. RP 792. The clerk issued a postal money order in the amount of \$351 as a refund. RP 351. The clerk remembered the person who presented the strips engaging in the same conduct a few times prior. RP 796. The clerk contacted Recovery Centers and advised them about the refunds. RP 797.

An investigation by Recovery Centers focused on Christopher Ausler, an employee who was a Chemical Dependency Intern. RP 728. On May 17, 2015, as a result of the investigation, Mr. Ausler was terminated from his position at Recovery Centers. RP 741. Discovered in Mr. Ausler's desk after his termination were blank postage strips. RP 744. Recovery Centers's postage meters did not use postage strips, thus Mr. Ausler did not use the meters at Recovery Centers to obtain refunds. RP 747.

An investigation by United States Postal Inspectors revealed numerous refunds to Mr. Ausler and another person the State alleged

was associated with Mr. Ausler at several Puget Sound post offices. RP 878-81. Additional investigation by Pitney Bowes revealed multiple accounts with lines of credit from Pitney Bowes in Mr. Ausler's name, which would allow him to purchase postage and rent postage meters. RP 902.

The State alleged Mr. Ausler obtained refunds for spoiled postage strips created on Pitney Bowes meters from the United States Postal Service. As a result, Mr. Ausler was charged with one count of first degree theft based on a multiple incidents. CP 1. The State also alleged the offense was a major economic offense, thus exposing Mr. Ausler to a potential exceptional sentence upon conviction. CP 1.

Mr. Ausler's first trial ended in a mistrial because of the State's failure to timely provide discovery. CP 51-52; RP 545. The trial court found the State's conduct was not willful, therefore a second trial was permitted. RP 545.

During closing arguments, and over defense objections, some of which were sustained by the trial court, the prosecutor impermissibly shifted and trivialized the State's burden of proof, and appealed to the jury's passions and prejudice. RP 1046-47, 1054, 1075-76. *See Part D., infra.*

Mr. Ausler was subsequently convicted as charged and sentenced to an exceptional sentence of six months. CP 172.

On appeal, Mr. Ausler submitted the prosecutor's improper arguments violated his right to a fair trial, an argument rejected by the Court of Appeals.

E. ARGUMENT ON WHY REVIEW SHOULD BE GRANTED

**The prosecutor's conduct during closing and rebuttal arguments constituted misconduct which prejudiced Mr. Ausler, requiring reversal of his conviction.**

The Sixth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution and article I, §§ 3 and 22 of the Washington Constitution guarantee the right to a fair trial. *State v. Finch*, 137 Wn.2d 792, 843, 975 P.2d 967, *cert. denied*, 528 U.S. 922 (1999). Prosecutors represent the State as quasi-judicial officers and they have a "duty to subdue their courtroom zeal for the sake of fairness to a criminal defendant." *State v. Fisher*, 165 Wn.2d 727, 746, 202 P.3d 937 (2009). "A '[f]air trial' certainly implies a trial in which the attorney representing the state does not throw the prestige of his public office . . . and the expression of his own belief of guilt into the scales against the accused." *State v. Monday*, 171 Wn.2d 667, 677, 257 P.3d 551 (2011), *citing State v. Case*, 49 Wn.2d 66, 71, 298 P.2d 500 (1956). Prosecutorial misconduct

may deprive a defendant of his constitutional right to a fair trial. *State v. Davenport*, 100 Wn.2d 757, 762, 675 P.2d 1213 (1984).

To establish that a new trial is required for prosecutorial misconduct during closing argument, the defendant must prove the prosecutor's remarks were both improper and prejudicial. *State v. Allen*, 182 Wn.2d 364, 373, 341 P.3d 268 (2015); *State v. Thorgerson*, 172 Wn.2d 438, 443, 258 P.3d 43 (2011).

1. *The prosecutor improperly trivialized the State's burden of proof and the jury's role in determining whether that burden was met.*

The prosecutor began his argument by trivializing the State's burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt:

Two, number two starts out the defendant is (inaudible). The last paragraph, the reasonable doubt is one for which a reason exists and may arise from the evidence or lack of evidence. That's an important sentence. It is one for which a reason exists. You have to have a reason to have reasonable doubt. (Inaudible.)

MR. SPENCER: Objection. That particular argument has previously been disapproved by the appellate courts. Move to strike.

MR. PETERSON: (Inaudible.)

THE COURT: The objection's overruled.

MR. PETERSON: It means that your -- reasonable doubt, if you have reasonable doubt, you have to be able to articulate what it is.



MR. SPENCER: Objection. Move for a continuing objection on this line of argument.

THE COURT: Sustained as to that argument.

RP 1054.

The prosecutor's argument required the jury to find a reason why Mr. Ausler was not guilty in order to find a reasonable doubt. While finding the first of the prosecutor's statements proper, the Court of Appeals agreed with the State's concession that the second statement, involving the fill-in-the-blank statement, was improper. Decision at 4.

But, the Court of Appeals determined the misconduct did not affect the jury's verdict. Decision at 4. This Court should grant review and find the misconduct did in fact affect the jury's verdict and remand for a new trial.

2. *The prosecutor's argument asking the jury to place itself in the shoes of the defendant impermissibly appealed to the jury's passion and prejudice.*

The prosecutor argued:

So just imagine for a moment you're at work one day, you've done nothing wrong, and two detectives, inspectors or whatever, come in and say, we've got evidence here (inaudible). Would you want to look at it?

MR. SPENCER: Objection. Burden shifting. Clients not required to --

THE COURT: Sustained.

MR. SPENCER: -- present any evidence.

THE COURT: Sustained, based on the golden rule. Go ahead.

RP 1046-47 (emphasis added).

The prosecutor's closing argument urged the jury to place itself in Mr. Ausler's position in analyzing the evidence, which impermissibly appealed to the jury's passion and prejudice. The Court of Appeals refused to find this argument misconduct, rather defining it was "unfortunately framed." Decision at 6.

Specific references by counsel to allusions, such as "urging the jurors to place themselves in the position of one of the parties to the litigation, or to grant a party the recovery they would wish themselves if they were in the same position," is an improper argument. *Adkins v. Aluminum Co. of Am.*, 110 Wn.2d 128, 139, 750 P.2d 1257, 756 P.2d 142 (1988). Such arguments are improper because they encourage the jurors to depart from neutrality and decide the case on the basis of personal interest rather than on the evidence. *Id.*, 110 Wn.2d at 139. Known as the "golden rule" in civil cases, in criminal matters such

arguments are misconduct because they appeal to the passion and prejudice of the jury. *State v. Borboa*, 157 Wn.2d 108, 124 n. 5, 135 P.3d 469 (2006); *State v. Pierce*, 169 Wn.App. 533, 555, 280 P.3d 1158 (2012).

This Court should grant this petition and find the argument improper. In addition, Mr. Ausler asks that this Court to rule that the misconduct affected the jury's verdict requiring reversal of his conviction.

#### F. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated, Mr. Ausler asks this Court to grant his petition, reverse his conviction and remand for a new trial.

DATED this 20<sup>th</sup> day of May 2019

Respectfully submitted,

*s/Thomas M. Kummerow*

\_\_\_\_\_  
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## APPENDIX

IN THE COURT OF APPEALS OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

THE STATE OF WASHINGTON,	)	No. 77662-2-1
	)	
Respondent,	)	DIVISION ONE
	)	
v.	)	UNPUBLISHED OPINION
	)	
CHRISTOPHER RONNELL AUSLER,	)	
	)	
Appellant.	)	
_____	)	FILED: April 22, 2019

HAZELRIGG-HERNANDEZ, J. — In order to prevail on a claim of prosecutorial misconduct, a defendant must show that the conduct was improper and that it resulted in prejudice that had a substantial likelihood of affecting the jury’s verdict. Finding no prejudice likely to affect the jury’s verdict, we affirm the judgment of the trial court.

FACTS

Christopher R. Ausler opened multiple accounts with Pitney Bowes, a company that manages postage meters for the United States Postal Service. Pitney Bowes generally offers a line of credit along with the postage meters for customers to print postage. Customers who no longer need printed postage are able to take it to the post office for a partial refund. Ausler printed postage from his various accounts and received refunds from post offices throughout King County. He did not repay Pitney Bowes.

The postmaster at the Seahurst-Burien post office, Linda Burton, became suspicious when Ausler came in for a refund because the postage was for large, unusual

amounts. Ausler was also recognized by post office staff as having previously conducted similar transactions at that location. Burton notified Ausler's employer regarding the unusual postage refund request because information on the refund form referenced the company's name and location in Kent. After an investigation, Carol Hayes, the executive director for Ausler's employer, met with Ausler and terminated his employment. Hayes testified regarding her conversation with Ausler.

Ausler was also investigated by United States Postal Inspector John Wiegand. Wiegand testified that he interviewed Ausler twice. He offered to show several postal refund forms, postal money order receipts, and spoiled postage to Ausler at the second interview. Ausler declined to look at the documents.

Ausler was charged with one count of first degree theft in King County Superior Court, with a major economic offense aggravator. In its closing statement, the prosecutor argued that "[y]ou have to have a reason to have reasonable doubt. . . you have to be able to articulate what it is." He argued that in his meeting with Hayes regarding her investigation, Ausler didn't say ". . .what the heck? I don't know anything about that. I never ordered any." Regarding the documents Wiegand brought to show Ausler, the prosecutor asked the jury to imagine themselves in Ausler's position and consider if they would want to see them.

Ausler objected to those arguments at trial, and contends on appeal that the misconduct in those arguments, either individually or cumulatively, entitles him to a new trial.

## DISCUSSION

### I. Misconduct in Closing Argument

“A claim of prosecutorial misconduct requires the defendant to show both that the prosecutor made improper statements and that those statements caused prejudice.” State v. Lindsay, 180 Wn.2d 423, 440, 326 P.3d 125 (2014). “If the defendant objected at trial, the defendant must show that the prosecutor’s misconduct resulted in prejudice that had a substantial likelihood of affecting the jury’s verdict.” State v. Emery, 174 Wn.2d 741, 760, 278 P.3d 653 (2012) (citing State v. Anderson, 153 Wn. App. 417, 427, 220 P.3d 1273 (2009)). If the defendant fails to object or request a curative instruction, the misconduct is waived unless an instruction could not have cured the resulting prejudice. Lindsay, 180 Wn.2d at 430 (citing State v. Stenson, 132 Wn.2d 688, 719, 940 P.2d 1239 (1997)).

Ausler argues that the prosecutor’s remarks during closing argument constitute misconduct and denied him a fair trial. The State argues that Ausler has waived review of this issue because he did not request a curative instruction or a mistrial. While some Supreme Court opinions use the word “waive,” it is clear that rather than precluding review, a failure to request those remedies changes the standard the court uses to evaluate prejudice. See, e.g., Emery, 174 Wn.2d at 762 (analyzing misconduct despite defendant’s failure to even object).

Here, Ausler’s challenge fails regardless of the prejudice standard we apply.

#### A. Reasonable Doubt

“Arguments by the prosecution that shift or misstate the State’s burden to prove the defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt constitute misconduct.” Lindsay, 180

Wn.2d at 434 (citing State v. Gregory, 158 Wn.2d 759, 859-60, 147 P.3d 1201 (2006)). Arguments requiring the jury to articulate its reasonable doubt are improper because they subtly shift the burden to the defense. Emery, 174 Wn.2d at 759-60.

Here, Ausler argues that two statements made by the State in closing argument constitute reversible misconduct. We hold that the first statement, “[y]ou have to have a reason to have reasonable doubt,” is a rough restatement of the pattern jury instruction definition of reasonable doubt, and therefore not an improper argument. See WPIC 4.01 (“A reasonable doubt is one for which a reason exists.”). The State concedes that the prosecutor’s second argument requiring the jury to articulate a reason for reasonable doubt is improper. It argues instead that Ausler’s objection to that argument was sustained and Ausler failed to request any additional remedy. The State argues that Ausler was not prejudiced because the court sustained his objection and properly instructed the jury on reasonable doubt. We agree.

The Supreme Court has considered very similar misconduct and held that any resulting prejudice was curable with a proper instruction. See Emery, 174 Wn.2d at 763-64 (argument requiring jury to fill-in-the-blank to have reasonable doubt was curable with proper instruction). Here, Ausler timely objected and his objection was sustained by the trial court. The prosecutor did not restate the improper argument or skirt the court’s ruling. The jury was properly instructed on reasonable doubt, and it is unlikely that the argument affected the jury’s verdict in light of the proper instructions and sustained objection. We do not find the requisite prejudice to remand this case for retrial.



B. Right to Silence

Ausler argues that the State improperly shifted the burden of proof and commented on his silence when the prosecutor commented on the statements Ausler did and did not make in an interview with Carol Hayes, Ausler's former employer. However, the Fifth Amendment does not normally apply to interactions with non-state actors. Colorado v. Connelly, 479 U.S. 157, 165, 107 S. Ct. 515, 93 L. Ed. 2d 473 (1986). Article I, §9 is interpreted equivalently with the Fifth Amendment. State v. Easter, 130 Wn.2d 228, 235, 922 P.2d 1285 (1996) (citing State v. Earls, 116 Wn.2d 364, 375-76, 805 P.2d 211 (1991)). Because Carol Hayes was not acting in any capacity for the state, Ausler's silence in her interview was not protected by the Fifth Amendment or Article I, §9.

Additionally, when a defendant does not remain silent, "the [S]tate may comment on what he does not say." State v. Clark, 143 Wn.2d 731, 765, 24 P.3d 1006 (2001) (emphasis in original) (citing State v. Young, 89 Wn.2d 613, 621, 574 P.2d 1171 (1978)). Ausler actively participated in the interview with Carol Hayes. The prosecutor's argument asking the jury to consider what Ausler did and did not say in that interview with a non-state actor was proper.

C. Passion and Prejudice

Next, Ausler argues that the State improperly appealed to the jury's passion and prejudice by asking the jury to imagine themselves in Ausler's position when he was approached by postal investigators at his work. His timely objection was sustained by the trial court based on the "golden rule." In civil cases, the so-called "golden rule" holds that arguments "urging the jurors to place themselves in the position of one of the parties to the litigation, or to grant a party the recovery they would wish themselves if they were in

the same position” are improper. Adkins v. Alum. Co. of Am., 110 Wn.2d 128, 139, 750 P.2d 1257 (1988) (citing J.Stein, Closing Argument §60, at 159 (1985)). The argument is “improper because it encourages the jury to depart from neutrality and to decide the case on the basis of personal interest and bias rather than on the evidence.” Adkins, 110 Wn.2d at 139 (quoting Rojas v. Richardson, 703 F.2d 186, 191 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983)). The Supreme Court has not adopted the “golden rule” for criminal cases, and instead suggests that these arguments are more appropriately considered as appeals to the sympathy or passions of the jury. State v. Borboa, 157 Wn.2d 108, 124, n. 5, 135 P.3d 469 (2006).

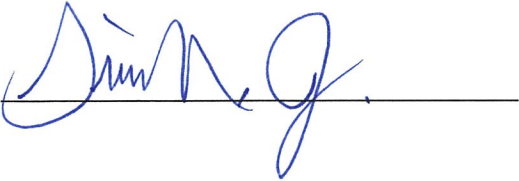
Here, it is not clear that the prosecutor’s argument was an appeal to the jury’s personal interest, bias, sympathy, or passions. We disapprove of the way the argument is framed because it asks the jurors to depart from an objective evaluation of the evidence, but this argument is more innocuous than inflammatory. It asks the jury only to evaluate Ausler’s reaction to the postal investigators and the documents they offered to show him. It was fair for the prosecutor to comment on Ausler’s reactions during the interview with the postal investigators. The argument does not ask the jurors to decide based on their own personal interests, attribute any malice to Ausler, or ask the jury to step into the shoes of a victim. Because the argument was on a proper subject and did not invite the jury to apply its passions or prejudices, we hold that the argument was not improper, even if it was unfortunately framed.

D. Cumulative Error

Ausler finally argues cumulative error based on the various assertions of prosecutorial misconduct. While we do find error as to Ausler’s first claim, we do not as to the second and third issues. As such, we do not find cumulative error.

Affirmed.

WE CONCUR:



## DECLARATION OF FILING AND MAILING OR DELIVERY

The undersigned certifies under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Washington that on the below date, the original document **Petition for Review to the Supreme Court** to which this declaration is affixed/attached, was filed in the **Court of Appeals** under **Case No. 77662-2-I**, and a true copy was mailed with first-class postage prepaid or otherwise caused to be delivered to the following attorney(s) or party/parties of record at their regular office or residence address as listed on ACORDS:

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Date: May 20, 2019

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