

72408-8

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Mar 25, 2015
Court of Appeals
Division I
State of Washington

NO. 72408-8-I

IN THE COURT OF APPEALS OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON
DIVISION ONE

STATE OF WASHINGTON,

Respondent,

v.

GEBREMESKEL GEBRETENSAE,

Appellant.

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

The Honorable Tanya L. Thorp, Judge

BRIEF OF APPELLANT

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A. ASSIGNMENT OF ERROR

The trial court erred by giving a constitutionally defective reasonable doubt instruction. CP 55 (Instruction 3).

Issues Pertaining to Assignment of Error

1. Did the reasonable doubt instruction stating a “reasonable doubt is one for which a reason exists” tell jurors that they must have more than just a reasonable doubt to acquit?

2. Did the reasonable doubt instruction undermine the presumption of innocence and impermissibly shift the burden of proof by telling jurors they must be able to articulate a reason to have a reasonable doubt?

3. Does erroneously instructing a jury regarding the meaning of reasonable doubt vitiate the jury-trial right, constituting structural error?

B. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

1. Procedural Facts

The King County Prosecutor charged appellant Gebremeskel Gebretensae with harassment and fourth degree assault. CP 1-2. The prosecution alleged that between January 16, 2014 and February 16, 2014, Gebretensae repeatedly threatened to kill his wife, Abeba Bahta, and also kicked her in the back. CP 3-6. The charges included allegations that the acts were committed against a "family or household member". CP 1-2.

A jury trial was held before the Honorable Tanya L. Thorp, in July 2014. 1RP-3RP.¹ Gebretensae was found guilty of harassment, but acquitted of the assault. CP 72-75; 3RP 345-48.

The court waived all non-mandatory fees and imposed a standard range sentences of 44 days, with credit for 44 days served. CP 76-80; 4RP 9. Gebretensae appeals. CP 82-87.

2. Substantive Facts

Bahta and Gebretensae both grew up in Ethiopia, and by family arrangement were married in 2009. 3RP 127-28, 234-36. They lived together in Ethiopia for about a month after being married before Gebretensae left for the United States and Bahta remained in Ethiopia to finish her college courses. 3RP 129.

Gebretensae returned to Ethiopia in 2011, for the purpose of impregnating Bahta. 3RP 238. Bahta, however, was on contraceptives at the time and was unwilling to have any children until she and Gebretensae lived in the same place. 3RP 130. Gebretensae returned to the United States after about a two-month stay. 3RP 130.

¹ There are seven volumes of verbatim report of proceedings referenced as follows: 1RP - 7/11/14 (pretrial); 2RP - 7/21/14 (pretrial); 3RP - four-volume consecutively paginated set for the dates of 7/21, 23-25/14 (trial); and 4RP - 8/22/14 (sentencing).

Bahta eventually joined Gebretensae in Seattle in January 2014. 3RP 131, 238-39. They lived together in a room in a communal home with three others. 3RP 134, 242-43.

According to Bahta, they got along fine when she first came to Seattle. 3RP 132-33, 136. According to Gebretensae, however, Bahta was not happy from the very beginning, complaining about the food and the rainy, cold weather. 3RP 241-42.

Bahta recalled Gebretensae's attitude towards her eventually changed and she overheard him commenting to one of their housemates that, "This woman, I wanted her to stay in Ethiopia to have children. People should just bring spices[,] . . . they should bring spices from Ethiopia and some food items, but not a woman." 3RP 136-37. When she complained to Gebretensae about his comment, she claims he replied, "I'm going to kill you and put you in the trash." 3RP 137. She claimed he said this or something like it often, but only once with a knife in his hand. 3RP 138, 140. Bahta feared he would follow through with the threat. 3RP 139.

Bahta also claimed that prior to him threatening her with a knife, Gebretensae kicked her twice in the back while they were arguing. 3RP 142. Bahta claim one of the kicks left her in pain for a long time. 3RP 141.

Gebretensae denied ever threatening to kill Bahta. 3RP 249. He also denied ever intentionally hitting or kicking Bahta, but admitted she had complained several times that he would kick her in the night as they slept. 3RP 252, 264. Gebretensae stated he was still in love with her, despite the accusations she brought against him. 3RP 253.

In closing argument, Gebretensae's counsel noted the prosecution had the burden to prove every element of each charge beyond a reasonable doubt, and argued it had failed to do so. 3RP 309-13, 317, 323-24.

C. ARGUMENT

THE MANDATORY JURY INSTRUCTION, "A REASONABLE DOUBT IS ONE FOR WHICH A REASON EXISTS," IS UNCONSTITUTIONAL

Gebretensae's jury was instructed, "A reasonable doubt is one for which a reason exists and may arise from the evidence or lack of evidence." CP 31; 6RP 57; 11 WASHINGTON PRACTICE: WASHINGTON PATTERN JURY INSTRUCTIONS: CRIMINAL 4.01, at 85 (3d ed. 2008) (WPIC). The Washington Supreme Court requires trial courts to provide this instruction in every criminal case, at least "until a better instruction is approved." State v. Bennett, 161 Wn.2d 303, 318, 165 P.3d 1241 (2007). A better instruction is needed because in its current form it is constitutionally defective because it requires the jury to articulate a reason to establish a reasonable doubt. In light of this serious instructional error, this Court must reverse.

WPIC 4.01 is invalid for two reasons. First, it tells jurors they must be able to articulate a reason for having a reasonable doubt. This engrafts an additional requirement on reasonable doubt. Jurors must have more than just a reasonable doubt; they must also have an articulable doubt. This makes it more difficult for jurors to acquit and easier for the prosecution to obtain convictions. Second, telling jurors a reason must exist for reasonable doubt undermines the presumption of innocence and is effectively identical to the fill-in-the-blank arguments that Washington courts have invalidated in prosecutorial misconduct cases. If fill-in-the-blank arguments impermissibly shift the burden of proof, so does an instruction requiring exactly the same thing. Instructing jurors with WPIC 4.01 is constitutional error.

a. WPIC 4.01's language improperly adds an articulation requirement

Having a "reasonable doubt" is not, as a matter of plain English, the same as having a reason to doubt. But WPIC 4.01 requires both for a jury to return a not guilty verdict. A basic examination of the meaning of the words "reasonable" and "a reason" reveals this grave flaw in WPIC 4.01.

"Reasonable" is defined as "being in agreement with right thinking or right judgment : not conflicting with reason : not absurd : not ridiculous . . . being or remaining within the bounds of reason . . . having the faculty of reason : RATIONAL . . . possessing good sound judgment . . ." WEBSTER'S

THIRD NEW INT'L DICTIONARY 1892 (1993). For a doubt to be reasonable under these definitions it must be rational, logically derived, and have no conflict with reason. Accord Jackson v. Virginia, 443 U.S. 307, 317, 99 S. Ct. 2781, 61 L. Ed. 2d 560 (1979) ("A 'reasonable doubt,' at a minimum, is one based upon 'reason.'"); Johnson v. Louisiana, 406 U.S. 356, 360, 92 S. Ct. 1620, 32 L. Ed. 2d 152 (1972) (collecting cases defining reasonable doubt as one "'based on reason which arises from the evidence or lack of evidence'" (quoting United States v. Johnson, 343 F.2d 5, 6 n.1 (2d Cir. 1965))).

The placement of the article "a" before "reason" in WPIC 4.01 inappropriately alters and augments the definition of reasonable doubt. "[A] reason" in the context of WPIC 4.01, means "an expression or statement offered as an explanation of a belief or assertion or as a justification." WEBSTER'S, supra, at 1891. In contrast to definitions employing the term "reason" in a manner that refers to a doubt based on reason or logic, WPIC 4.01's use of the words "a reason" indicates that reasonable doubt must be capable of explanation or justification. In other words, WPIC 4.01 requires more than just a reasonable doubt; it requires an explainable, articulable, reasonable doubt.

Washington's reasonable doubt instruction is unconstitutional because its language requires more than just a reasonable doubt to acquit.

Cf. In re Winship, 397 U.S. 358, 364, 90 S. Ct. 1068, 25 L. Ed. 2d 368 (1970) ("[W]e explicitly hold that the Due Process Clause protects the accused against conviction except upon proof beyond a reasonable doubt"). Indeed, under the current instruction, jurors could have a reasonable doubt but also have difficulty articulating or explaining why their doubt is reasonable. A case might present such voluminous and contradictory evidence that jurors having legitimate reasonable doubt would struggle putting it into words or pointing to a specific, discrete reason for it. Yet, despite reasonable doubt, acquittal would not be an option.

Scholarship on the reasonable doubt standard elucidates similar concerns with requiring jurors to articulate their doubt:

An inherent difficulty with an articulability requirement of doubt is that it lends itself to reduction without end. If the juror is expected to explain the basis for a doubt, that explanation gives rise to its own need for justification. If a juror's doubt is merely, 'I didn't think the state's witness was credible,' the juror might be expected to then say why the witness was not credible. The requirement for reasons can all too easily become a requirement for reasons for reasons, ad infinitum.

One can also see a potential for creating a barrier to acquit for less-educated or skillful jurors. A juror who lacks the rhetorical skill to communicate reasons for a doubt is then, as a matter of law, barred from acting on that doubt. This bar is more than a basis for other jurors to reject the first juror's doubt. It is a basis for them to attempt to convince that juror that the doubt is not a legal basis to vote for acquittal.

A troubling conclusion that arises from the difficulties of the requirement of articulability is that it hinders the juror who has a doubt based on the belief that the totality of the evidence is insufficient. Such a doubt lacks the specificity implied in an obligation to 'give a reason,' an obligation that appears focused on the details of the arguments. Yet this is precisely the circumstance in which the rhetoric of the law, particularly the presumption of innocence and the state burden of proof, require acquittal.

Steve Sheppard, The Metamorphoses of Reasonable Doubt: How Changes in the Burden of Proof Have Weakened the Presumption of Innocence, 78 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 1165, 1213-14 (2003) (footnotes omitted). In these various scenarios, despite having reasonable doubt, jurors could not vote to acquit in light of WPIC 4.01's direction to articulate a reasonable doubt. By requiring more than a reasonable doubt to acquit a criminal defendant, WPIC 4.01 violates the federal and state due process clauses. Winship, 297 U.S. at 364; U.S. CONST. amends. V, XIV; CONST. art. I, § 3.

b. WPIC 4.01's articulation requirement impermissibly undermines the presumption of innocence

"The presumption of innocence is the bedrock upon which the criminal justice system stands." Bennett, 161 Wn.2d at 315. It "can be diluted and even washed away if reasonable doubt is defined so as to be illusive or too difficult to achieve." Id. at 316. To avoid this, Washington courts have strenuously protected the presumption of innocence by rejecting an articulation requirement in different contexts. This court should similarly safeguard the presumption of innocence in this case.

In the context of prosecutorial misconduct, courts have proscribed arguments that jurors must articulate a reason for having reasonable doubt. Fill-in-the-blank arguments are flatly barred "because they misstate the reasonable doubt standard and impermissibly undermine the presumption of innocence." State v. Emery, 174 Wn.2d 741, 759, 278 P.3d 653 (2012). The Court of Appeals has repeatedly rejected such arguments as prosecutorial misconduct. See, e.g., State v. Walker, 164 Wn. App. 724, 731, 265 P.3d 191 (2011) (holding improper prosecutor's PowerPoint slide that read, "If you were to find the defendant not guilty, you *have* to say: 'I had a reasonable doubt[.]' What was the reason for your doubt? 'My reason was ____.'"); State v. Johnson, 158 Wn. App. 677, 682, 684, 243 P.3d 936 (2010) (holding improper argument when prosecutor told jurors that they have to say, "I doubt the defendant is guilty and my reason is I believed his testimony that . . . he didn't know that the cocaine was in there, and he didn't know what cocaine was" and that "[t]o be able to find reason to doubt, you have to fill in the blank, that's your job" (quoting reports of proceedings)); State v. Venegas, 155 Wn. App. 507, 523-24 & n.16, 228 P.3d 813 (2010) (holding flagrant and ill intentioned the prosecutor's statement "In order to find the defendant not guilty, you have to say to yourselves: 'I doubt the defendant is guilty, and my reason is"—blank" (quoting report of proceedings)); State v. Anderson, 153 Wn. App. 417, 431, 220 P.3d 1273

(2009) (finding improper prosecutor's statement that "'in order to find the defendant not guilty, you have to say 'I don't' believe the defendant is guilty because,' and then you have to fill in the blank'" (quoting report of proceedings)).

Although it does not explicitly require jurors to fill in a blank, WPIC 4.01 implies that jurors need to do just that. Trial courts instruct jurors that a reason must exist for their reasonable doubt—this is, in substance, the same mental exercise as telling jurors they need to fill in a blank with an explanation or justification in order to acquit. If telling jurors they must articulate a reason for reasonable doubt is prosecutorial misconduct because it undermines the presumption of innocence, it makes no sense to allow the exact same undermining to occur through a jury instruction.

Outside the prosecutorial misconduct realm, Division Two recently acknowledged that an articulation requirement in a trial court's preliminary instruction on reasonable doubt would have been error had the issue been preserved. State v. Kalebaugh, 179 Wn. App. 414, 421-23, 318 P.3d 288, review granted, 180 Wn.2d 1013, 327 P.3d 54 (2014). The court determined Kalebaugh could not demonstrate actual prejudice given that the trial court instructed the jury with WPIC 4.01 at the end of trial. Id. at 422-23. The court therefore concluded the error was not manifest under RAP 2.5(a). Id. at 424.

In sidestepping the issue before it on procedural grounds, the Kalebaugh court pointed to WPIC 4.01's language with approval. 179 Wn. App. at 422-23. In considering a challenge to fill-in-the-blank arguments, the Emery court similarly approved of defining "reasonable doubt as a 'doubt for which a reason exists.'" 174 Wn.2d at 760. But neither Emery nor Kalebaugh gave any explanation or analysis regarding why an articulation requirement is unconstitutional in one context but not unconstitutional in all contexts.² Furthermore, neither court was considering a direct challenge to the WPIC 4.01 language, so their approval of WPIC 4.01's language does not control. See In re Electric Lightwave, Inc., 123 Wn.2d 530, 541, 869 P.2d 1045 (1994) ("[Courts] do not rely on cases that fail to specifically raise or decide an issue.").

Just like a preliminary instruction to jurors that they must give a reason to have a reasonable doubt and just like a fill-in-the-blank argument, WPIC 4.01 "improperly implies that the jury must be able to articulate its reasonable doubt" Emery, 174 Wn.2d at 760. By requiring more than

² The Kalebaugh court stated it "simply [could not] draw clean parallels between cases involving a prosecutor's fill-in-the-blank argument during closing, and a trial court's improper preliminary instruction before the presentation of evidence." But drawing such "parallels" is a very simple task, as both errors undermine the presumption of innocence by misstating the reasonable doubt standard. As the dissenting judge correctly surmised, "if the requirement of articulability constituted error in the mouth of a deputy prosecutor, it would surely also do so in the mouth of the judge." Kalebaugh, 179 Wn. App. at 427 (Bjorgen, J., dissenting).

just a reasonable doubt to acquit, WPIC 4.01 impermissibly undercuts the presumption of innocence. WPIC 4.01 is unconstitutional.

c. WPIC 4.01's articulation requirement requires reversal

An instruction that eases the State's burden of proof and undermines the presumption of innocence violates the Sixth Amendment's jury-trial guarantee. Sullivan v. Louisiana, 508 U.S. 275, 279-80, 113 S. Ct. 2078, 124 L. Ed. 2d 182 (1993). Indeed, where, as here, the "instructional error consists of a misdescription of the burden of proof, [it] vitiates *all* the jury's findings." Id. at 281. Failing to properly instruct jurors regarding reasonable doubt "unquestionably qualifies as 'structural error.'" Id. at 281-82.

As discussed, WPIC 4.01's language requires more than just a reasonable doubt to acquit criminal defendants; it requires a reasonable, articulable doubt. Its articulation requirement undermines the presumption of innocence. WPIC 4.01 misinstructs jurors on the meaning of reasonable doubt. Instructing jurors with WPIC 4.01 is structural error and requires reversal. Because Gebretensae's jury was so misinstructed, reversal is warranted.

D. CONCLUSION

This court should reverse and remand for a new trial based on the trial court's constitutionally deficient instruction on reasonable doubt.

DATED this 25th day of March 2015.

Respectfully submitted,

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IN THE COURT OF APPEALS OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON
DIVISION ONE

STATE OF WASHINGTON)	
)	
Respondent,)	
)	
v.)	COA NO. 72408-8-1
)	
GEBREMESKEL GEBRETENSAE,)	
)	
Appellant.)	

DECLARATION OF SERVICE

I, PATRICK MAYOVSKY, DECLARE UNDER PENALTY OF PERJURY UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON THAT THE FOLLOWING IS TRUE AND CORRECT:

THAT ON THE 25TH DAY OF MARCH 2015, I CAUSED A TRUE AND CORRECT COPY OF THE **BRIEF OF APPELLANT** TO BE SERVED ON THE PARTY / PARTIES DESIGNATED BELOW BY EMAIL AND/OR DEPOSITING SAID DOCUMENT IN THE UNITED STATES MAIL.

[X] GEBREMESKEL GEBRETENSAE
 1912 E. YESLSER WAY
 SEATTLE, WA 98122

SIGNED IN SEATTLE WASHINGTON, THIS 25TH DAY OF MARCH 2015.

X *Patrick Mayovsky*