

SUPREME COURT OF GEORGIA

Dennis v. State

300 Ga. 457 (2017) · Decided January 23, 2017

SUMMARY

The Georgia Supreme Court affirmed the resentencing of Robert James Dennis, who committed malice murder at age 17, from life without parole to life with the possibility of parole. The court held that the original sentence was void under *Miller v. Alabama* and *Montgomery v. Louisiana* because the sentencing court had not considered the required youth-related factors, and that the trial court had authority to resentence Dennis.

CASE DETAILS

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| COURT                 | Supreme Court of Georgia                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| WRITING FOR THE COURT | Melton, Presiding Justice; All the Justices                                                                                                                                                                 |
| JURISDICTION          | Georgia                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| DECIDED               | January 23, 2017                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| DISPOSITION           | affirmed                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| PROCEDURAL POSTURE    | Dennis appealed pro se from the trial court's order resentencing him after the State moved to amend his juvenile malice-murder sentence under <i>Miller v. Alabama</i> and <i>Montgomery v. Louisiana</i> . |
| STANDARD OF REVIEW    | De novo review of the legal authority to resentence and the constitutionality of the sentence under the Eighth Amendment.                                                                                   |
| PRECEDENTIAL VALUE    | Published Georgia Supreme Court opinion; precedential.                                                                                                                                                      |
| PARTIES               | Robert James Dennis v. State                                                                                                                                                                                |

TOPICS

- sentencing
- cruel and unusual punishment
- criminal procedure
- post-conviction relief
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal law
- constitutional law
- sentencing
- post-conviction relief
- appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court had authority to resentence Dennis after determining that his original juvenile life-without-parole sentence was void under Miller and Montgomery.
2. Whether the trial court properly reduced Dennis's sentence for malice murder from life without the possibility of parole to life with the possibility of parole.

## HOLDINGS

1. A life-without-the-possibility-of-parole sentence imposed on a juvenile without the sentencing court's consideration of the Miller and Montgomery factors is void and may be challenged on Eighth Amendment grounds at any time.
2. Because Dennis's original sentence was void, the trial court had authority to resentence him at any time in accordance with Miller and Montgomery.
3. The trial court properly resentedenced Dennis to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole for the juvenile malice murder.

## KEY QUOTATIONS

*“A sentence imposed in violation of th[e] substantive rule [created by Miller, supra] — that is, a[ ] [life-without-the-possibility-of-parole] sentence imposed on a juvenile who is not properly determined to be in the very small class of juveniles for whom such a sentence may be deemed constitutionally proportionate — “is not just erroneous but contrary to law and, as a result, void.”” (458)*

*“A hearing where “youth and its attendant characteristics” are considered as sentencing factors is necessary to separate those juveniles who may be sentenced to life without parole from those who may not.” (458)*

## FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Dennis was 17 when he committed the malice murder for which he pleaded guilty and was sentenced in 1998 to life without the possibility of parole. The original sentencing record did not show that the court considered the youth-related factors required by Miller and Montgomery before imposing juvenile life without parole.

## PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Dennis pleaded guilty in 1998 to malice murder and other charges arising from a 1997 shooting death and received life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for malice murder. In 2015, the State moved to amend the sentence based on Miller and Montgomery. Following a December 9, 2015 resentencing hearing, the trial court reduced the sentence to life with the possibility of parole. The Supreme Court of Georgia affirmed.

## DISPOSITION

affirmed

## CASES CITED

- Miller v. Alabama, Miller v. Alabama, 567 U.S. 460, 132 S. Ct. 2455, 183 L. Ed. 2d 407 (2012)
- Montgomery v. Louisiana, 577 U.S. 190, 136 S. Ct. 718, 193 L. Ed. 2d 599 (2016)

- *Veal v. State*, 298 Ga. 691, 784 S.E.2d 403 (2016)
- *Crumbley v. State*, 261 Ga. 610, 409 S.E.2d 517 (1991)
- *Williams v. State*, 271 Ga. 686, 523 S.E.2d 857 (1999)
- *State v. Barrow*, 332 Ga. App. 353, 772 S.E.2d 802 (2015)

## OPINION

*Dennis v. State*

300 Ga. 457

MELTON, J.

MELTON, Presiding Justice. On October 18, 1998, Robert James Dennis, who was 17 years old, pled guilty to several charges, including malice murder, in connection with the February 22, 1997 shooting death of Louise Carter. Dennis was sentenced, in relevant part to this appeal, to life in prison without the possibility of parole for malice murder. On October 14, 2015, the State filed a motion to amend Dennis’ sentence based on the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U. S. 460 (132 SCt 2455, 183 LE2d 407) (2012), which held that the Eighth Amendment’s prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment “forbids a sentencing scheme that mandates life in prison without possibility of parole for juvenile offenders” without a sentencing court first “tak[ing] into account how children are different, and how those differences counsel against irrevocably sentencing them to a lifetime in prison.” *Id.* at 2469 (II). The United States Supreme Court further refined its ruling in *Miller*, *supra*, in *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, \_U. S.\_ (136 SCt 718, 193 LE2d 599) (2016), stating in relevant part: A hearing where “youth and its attendant characteristics” are considered as sentencing factors is necessary to separate those juveniles who may be sentenced to life without parole from those who may not. The hearing does not replace but rather gives effect to *Miller*’s substantive holding that life without parole is an excessive sentence for children whose crimes reflect transient immaturity. (Citation omitted.) *Id.* at 735 (III). Following a December 9, 2015 resentencing hearing, the trial court reduced Dennis’ malice murder sentence from life without the possibility of parole to life with the possibility of parole. Dennis appeals *pro se* from this resentencing ruling,<sup>1</sup> and, for the reasons that follow, we affirm. \*458The sole issue to be resolved in this appeal is whether the trial court erred by reducing Dennis’ malice murder sentence from life without the possibility of parole to life with the possibility of parole.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, as this Court has recently made clear: [A] sentence imposed in violation of th[e] substantive rule [created by *Miller*, *supra*] — that is, a[ ] [life-without-the-possibility-of-parole] sentence imposed on a juvenile who is not properly determined to be in the very small class of juveniles for whom such a sentence may be deemed constitutionally proportionate — “is not just erroneous but contrary to law and, as a result, void.” *Montgomery*, [*supra*, 136 SCt] at 731 [(II)]. [Accordingly,] state collateral review courts that are open to federal law claims must apply *Miller* retroactively if a petitioner challenges his sentence under the Eighth Amendment.<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis omitted.) *Veal v. State*, 298 Ga. 691, 701 (5) (d) (784 SE2d 403) (2016).

Indeed, “[w]here a sentence is void, . . . the court may resentence the defendant at any time.” (Citation omitted.) *Crumbley v. State*, 261 Ga. 610, 611 (1) (409 SE2d 517) (1991); see also, e.g., *Williams v. State*, 271 Ga. 686, 689 (1) (523 SE2d 857) (1999). Here, the transcript of the 1998 guilty plea hearing reveals that the sentencing court did not examine any of the required factors under *Miller* and *Montgomery* “before concluding that life without any possibility of parole was the appropriate penalty” for Dennis, who committed malice murder when he was a 17-year-old juvenile. *Miller*, supra, 132 SCt at 2469 (II). See also *Veal*, supra, 298 Ga. at 702-703 (5) (d) (It is “necessary” for a trial court to make a “distinct determination on the record that [the juvenile defendant] is irreparably corrupt or permanently incorrigible” in order to “put him in \*459the narrow class of juvenile murderers for whom a[ ] [life-without-the-possibility-of-parole] sentence is proportional under the Eighth Amendment as interpreted in *Miller* as refined by *Montgomery*”). Thus, Dennis’ 1998 sentence of life without the possibility of parole was void and subject to a challenge on Eighth Amendment grounds at any time. See *id.* Decided January 23, 2017. Robert James Dennis, pro se. J. David Miller, District Attorney, Michelle T. Harrison, Kenneth B. Still, Assistant District Attorneys; Samuel S. Olens, Attorney General, Patricia B. Attaway Burton, Deputy Attorney General, Paula K. Smith, Senior Assistant Attorney General, for appellee. Because Dennis’ original sentence for malice murder was void, the trial court was free to resentence him for malice murder pursuant to *Miller* and *Montgomery*. See *Veal*, supra. In this connection, the trial court properly resentenced Dennis to the legally permissible sentence of life in prison with the possibility of parole for the malice murder that he committed as a juvenile. Judgment affirmed. All the Justices concur. Although Dennis’ resentencing is the only issue properly before us in this appeal, Dennis attempts to raise several other issues in his pro se appellate brief that were either never raised \*458below or are unrelated to his resentencing. Because those issues are unrelated to the trial court’s resentencing order, or are otherwise not properly before us, they will not be addressed here. Dennis argues that the trial court did not have the authority to resentence him. However, we note that, if this argument had merit, it would not actually benefit Dennis, as he would remain imprisoned under the harsher penalty of life without the possibility of parole rather than life with the possibility of parole. In any event, as explained more fully in the body of this opinion, the trial court did in fact have the authority to resentence Dennis consistent with the requirements of *Miller* and *Montgomery*, supra. While it is true that, here, the State, rather than Dennis, filed the motion to amend Dennis’ sentence, the State is authorized to file such a motion for a trial court’s consideration. See, e.g., *State v. Barrow*, 332 Ga. App. 353 (772 SE2d 802) (2015) (involving appeal by State from trial court’s denial of State’s motion to vacate or correct the defendant’s sentence).