

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Daniel John-Reif v. Ryan Gray, et al.

Daniel John-Reif v. Ryan Gray, No. 2:24-cv-0968-KJM-JDP (PS) (E.D. Cal. Apr. 24, 2025) · No. 2:24-cv-0968-KJM-JDP (PS) · Decided April 24, 2025

SUMMARY

The Eastern District of California screens Daniel John-Reif’s pro se civil rights complaint against California state officers and a state court judge. The court grants in forma pauperis status, dismisses the complaint for failure to state cognizable claims, and grants leave to amend within thirty days, citing deficiencies in the excessive-force allegations, judicial immunity, and Younger abstention.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jeremy D. Peterson
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	April 24, 2025
DOCKET	2:24-cv-0968-KJM-JDP (PS)
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se plaintiff brought a civil-rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 and applied to proceed in forma pauperis. On screening under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), the court found the complaint non-cognizable, granted in forma pauperis status, and dismissed the complaint with leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court screened the in forma pauperis complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), accepting the pleading standard under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2) and evaluating whether the allegations stated a plausible claim for relief.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unknown; unpublished district court order
PARTIES	Daniel John-Reif v. Ryan Gray, Sabrina Buis, Todd Jones, Michael Deems

TOPICS

section 1983

pleadings

civil procedure

fourth amendment

criminal procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

civil rights

criminal procedure

constitutional law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated cognizable claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 sufficient to survive screening under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e).
2. Whether the excessive-force allegations were sufficiently specific as to each officer.
3. Whether the claim against the state court judge was barred by judicial immunity.
4. Whether the federal court had to abstain under *Younger* from hearing challenges to pending state criminal proceedings.

HOLDINGS

1. A complaint proceeding under in forma pauperis status must be screened and dismissed, in whole or in part, if it is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim, or seeks monetary relief from an immune defendant; the complaint here did not state cognizable claims and was dismissed with leave to amend.
2. An excessive-force claim was inadequately pleaded because plaintiff provided no factual detail explaining how each officer wrongfully used force, although the court granted leave to amend.
3. Judges are immune from claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 for actions taken in their judicial capacity; the claim based on Judge Deems's entry of a not-guilty plea therefore could not proceed.
4. To the extent criminal charges remained pending in state court, the federal court was required to refrain from hearing challenges to those proceedings under the *Younger* abstention doctrine.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A complaint must contain a short and plain statement that plaintiff is entitled to relief, Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a) (2), and provide “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face,” Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007).” (1)

“Despite plaintiff’s contention to the contrary, it is settled law that judges are immune from section 1983 claims for actions taken in their judicial capacity.” (3)

“Except under narrow circumstances that are not present in this case, federal courts must abstain from interfering with pending state criminal proceedings.” (3)

“Plaintiff’s amended complaint should be titled “First Amended Complaint.”” (3-4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff alleged that defendant Ryan Gray stopped him for driving without a license plate and requested identification, which plaintiff refused to provide. After plaintiff refused to exit the vehicle, Gray, Sabrina Buis, and Todd Jones removed him from the vehicle; plaintiff alleged excessive force and claimed that officers

confiscated weapons and searched his vehicle. Plaintiff was later booked and released on bail, alleged that Gray brought fabricated charges, and challenged a state judge's entry of a not-guilty plea on his behalf.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

John-Reif sued California State Parks and Recreation officers and a state court judge based on a traffic stop, his removal from a vehicle, searches and seizure of weapons, criminal charges, bail-related problems, and the entry of a not-guilty plea on his behalf. The district court screened the complaint, concluded that the allegations failed to state cognizable federal claims or implicated judicial immunity and Younger abstention, and dismissed with leave to amend. The court gave plaintiff thirty days to file an amended complaint or a notice of voluntary dismissal.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Vazquez v. Cal. Highway Patrol, No. 15-cv-00330-JCS, 2015 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 44885, *3-6 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 2, 2015)
- Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009)
- Kobold v. Good Samaritan Reg’l Med. Ctr., 832 F.3d 1024, 1038 (9th Cir. 2016)
- Nagrampa v. MailCoups, Inc., 469 F.3d 1257, 1264 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc)
- Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam)
- Hayes v. Idaho Corr. Ctr., 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Bruns v. Nat’l Credit Union Admin., 122 F.3d 1251, 1257 (9th Cir. 1997)
- Ivey v. Bd. of Regents, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)
- Young v. Siraco, No. 2-cv-05418 EJD (PR), 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 145812, at *6 (N.D. Cal. Aug. 18, 2023)
- Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37 (1971)
- Mitchell v. Washington, No. C12-1930-RSL-BAT, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 184399, *2 (W.D. Wash. Dec. 5, 2012)

OPINION

(PS) John-Reif v. Gray

PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10 11 DANIEL JOHN-REIF, Case No. 2:24-cv-0968-KJM-JDP (PS) 12 Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER 14
15 RYAN GRAY, et al., 15 Defendants. 16 17 Plaintiff Daniel John-Reif brings this action against

defendants Ryan Gray, Sabrina Buis, 18 and Todd Jones, all of whom are California State Parks and Recreation officers, and Michael 19 Deems, a state court judge. After review of his complaint, I find that the claims are non- 20 cognizable, and I will dismiss the pleading with leave to amend. I will also grant his application 21 to proceed in forma pauperis, ECF No. 2, which makes the showing required by 28 U.S.C. 22 §§ 1915(a)(1) and (2). 23 Screening and Pleading Requirements 24 A federal court must screen the complaint of any claimant seeking permission to proceed 25 in forma pauperis. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e). The court must identify any cognizable claims and 26 dismiss any portion of the complaint that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon 27 which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such 28 relief. *Id.* 1 A complaint must contain a short and plain statement that plaintiff is entitled to relief, 2 Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and provide “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its 3 face,” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). The plausibility standard does not 4 require detailed allegations, but legal conclusions do not suffice. See *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 5 662, 678 (2009). If the allegations “do not permit the court to infer more than the mere 6 possibility of misconduct,” the complaint states no claim. *Id.* at 679. The complaint need not 7 identify “a precise legal theory.” *Kobold v. Good Samaritan Reg’l Med. Ctr.*, 832 F.3d 1024, 8 1038 (9th Cir. 2016). Instead, what plaintiff must state is a “claim”—a set of “allegations that 9 give rise to an enforceable right to relief.” *Nagrampa v. MailCoups, Inc.*, 469 F.3d 1257, 1264 10 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc) (citations omitted). 11 The court must construe a pro se litigant’s complaint liberally. See *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 12 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam). The court may dismiss a pro se litigant’s complaint “if it 13 appears beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which 14 would entitle him to relief.” *Hayes v. Idaho Corr. Ctr.*, 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017). 15 However, “a liberal interpretation of a civil rights complaint may not supply essential elements 16 of the claim that were not initially pled.” *Bruns v. Nat’l Credit Union Admin.*, 122 F.3d 1251, 17 1257 (9th Cir. 1997) (quoting *Ivey v. Bd. of Regents*, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)). 18 Analysis 19 Plaintiff’s lengthy complaint begins with the allegation that he was pulled over by 20 defendant Gray for driving without a license plate. ECF No. 1 at 8. Plaintiff took umbrage with 21 the stop because he believes that license plates are not required if he is “travelling in [his] private 22 capacity.” *Id.* at 9. Gray asked plaintiff to produce his identification, and he refused, believing 23 that he was under no obligation to do so. *Id.* at 11. Plaintiff’s claims that state licensing 24 requirements are inapplicable to him are frivolous and have been rejected by other courts. See 25 *Vazquez v. Cal. Highway Patrol*, No. 15-cv-00330-JCS, 2015 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 44885, *3-6 26 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 2, 2015). 27 Gray asked plaintiff to step out of the vehicle, plaintiff refused, and the officer radioed for 28 backup. *Id.* at 14. Defendants Buis and Jones arrived, and Gray pulled plaintiff from his vehicle, 1 since he persisted in refusing to step out. *Id.* at 15. He does allege that the officers used 2 excessive force in the removal, but he offers no factual detail as to how each officer wrongfully 3 used force. He may address this lack of context in his amended complaint, if he chooses to file 4 one. The officers then

confiscated weapons from plaintiff's person and searched his vehicle over 5 his protestations. Id. at 16. 6 Plaintiff was booked into Oroville County Jail and made bail. Id. at 18-19. He claims 7 that, after he was exonerated in the relevant court case, he could not recover the bail money 8 because it was paid for "Nicolas James Reis." Id. at 18. I cannot tell what defendant, if any, is 9 alleged to be responsible for this apparent clerical error, nor does there appear to be any viable 10 federal claim associated therewith. 11 Plaintiff was allegedly charged with "made up" violations by defendant Gray, though he 12 does not explain how they were fabricated. Id. at 20. And, given his mention of the district 13 attorney elsewhere in his complaint, id. at 23, it does not appear that Gray was personally 14 responsible for bringing any charges against him. At an appearance in front of Judge Deems, 15 plaintiff claims that his rights were violated when the judge entered a not guilty plea on his 16 behalf. Id. at 20-21. Despite plaintiff's contention to the contrary, it is settled law that judges are 17 immune from section 1983 claims for actions taken in their judicial capacity. See *Young v. 18 Siraco*, No. 2-cv-05418 EJD (PR), 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 145812, at *6 (N.D. Cal. Aug. 18, 19 2023). Finally, to the extent that charges remain pending against plaintiff in state court, this court 20 must refrain from hearing any challenge to them under the Younger abstention doctrine. See 21 *Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971); *Mitchell v. Washington*, No. C12-1930-RSL-BAT, 2012 22 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 184399, *2 (W.D. Wash. Dec. 5, 2012) (citing Younger and noting that 23 "[e]xcept under narrow circumstances that are not present in this case, federal courts must abstain 24 from interfering with pending state criminal proceedings."). 25 I will dismiss the complaint with leave to amend. Plaintiff is advised that an amended 26 complaint will entirely supersede its predecessor and must be complete in itself, without reference 27 to prior pleadings. Plaintiff's amended complaint should be titled "First Amended Complaint." 28 1 Accordingly, it is hereby ORDERED that: 2 1. Plaintiff's motion to proceed in forma pauperis, ECF No. 2, is GRANTED. 3 2. Plaintiff's complaint, ECF No. 1, is DISMISSED with leave to amend. 4 3. Within thirty days from service of this order, plaintiff shall file either (1) an amended 5 | complaint or (2) notice of voluntary dismissal of this action without prejudice. 6 4. Failure to timely file either an amended complaint or notice of voluntary dismissal may 7 | result in the imposition of sanctions, including a recommendation that this action be dismissed 8 | with prejudice pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b). 9 5. The Clerk of Court shall send plaintiff a complaint form with this order. 10 W/ IT IS SO ORDERED. 12 (ie — Dated: _ April 24, 2025 Q———

13 JEREMY D. PETERSON

4 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28