

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Ryan v. Fuentes

Ryan · No. 2:25-cv-0925-DJC-JDP (PS) · Decided April 29, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California screened Natasha Ryan’s pro se complaint concerning a state-court child custody determination and claims against numerous defendants. The court held that it lacked jurisdiction over the custody-related claims under the domestic-relations exception and Rooker-Feldman doctrine, and identified additional defects involving state action, immunity, and joinder. The court granted in forma pauperis status, dismissed the complaint with leave to amend, and gave plaintiff thirty days to amend or voluntarily dismiss.

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 29, 2025
DOCKET	2:25-cv-0925-DJC-JDP (PS)
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Screening order in a pro se civil-rights action filed against state and private defendants; the court granted in forma pauperis status and dismissed the complaint with leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Screening under 28 U.S.C. § 1915 and the pleading standards of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2); the court accepted well-pleaded factual allegations but disregarded conclusory legal assertions and assessed whether the complaint stated a plausible claim.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential

TOPICS

- subject matter jurisdiction
- child custody
- section 1983
- joinder
- pleadings

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the federal district court had subject-matter jurisdiction over claims seeking to invalidate or otherwise challenge a state-court child-custody determination.
2. Whether the complaint stated claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against private parties, judicial and quasi-judicial actors, an attorney, and other defendants.
3. Whether the complaint improperly joined unrelated claims and defendants in violation of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 20.
4. Whether the complaint should be dismissed with leave to amend rather than dismissed with prejudice at the screening stage.

HOLDINGS

1. The federal district court lacks jurisdiction to adjudicate child-custody claims because custody disputes are matters of domestic relations governed primarily by state law.
2. A federal district court lacks subject-matter jurisdiction over a forbidden de facto appeal from a state-court custody judgment and over issues inextricably intertwined with that judgment.
3. A § 1983 defendant must have acted under color of state law, meaning the defendant exercised power possessed by virtue of state law and made possible by authority of state law.
4. Judges are absolutely immune from damages liability for judicial acts; mediators have quasi-judicial immunity for conduct within the scope of their authority; and criminal defense attorneys generally do not act under color of state law when handling criminal cases.
5. A plaintiff may not join unrelated claims against unrelated defendants in one action under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 20.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“At its core, plaintiff’s complaint is about her losing custody of her children.” (at 2)

“This court does not have jurisdiction over child custody claims, which are exclusively matters of state law.”
(at 3)

“Plaintiff asks this court to invalidate a state court decision granting custody of her children to her children’s father, defendant Contreras—a type of review that Rooker-Feldman squarely prohibits.” (at 4)

“Under Rule 20 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, a plaintiff cannot bring unrelated claims against different defendants.” (at 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Ryan's complaint challenged the loss of custody of her children after a March 2025 custody hearing in Stanislaus Superior Court. She alleged that she was unable to participate in the hearing because it was conducted online and she experienced technical difficulties. She also asserted claims against the children's father and his girlfriend, a

judge, a mediator, an attorney, school-district and police employees, and a county agency based on various unrelated events.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Natasha Ryan filed a complaint alleging grievances arising primarily from a state-court child-custody proceeding and naming numerous defendants. The district court screened the complaint, concluded that it lacked subject-matter jurisdiction over the custody-related claims and identified additional pleading, state-action, immunity, and joinder defects. The court dismissed the complaint with leave to amend and allowed thirty days for an amended complaint or voluntary dismissal.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- 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 Regional Medical Center, 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 Correctional Center, 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Bruns v. National Credit Union Administration, 122 F.3d 1251, 1257 (9th Cir. 1997)
- Ivey v. Board of Regents, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)
- Ankenbrandt v. Richards, 504 U.S. 689, 702-04 (1992)
- Peterson v. Babbitt, 708 F.2d 465, 466 (9th Cir. 1983)
- Thompson v. Thompson, 798 F.2d 1547, 1558 (9th Cir. 1986)
- Worldwide Church of God v. McNair, 805 F.2d 888, 890 (9th Cir. 1986)
- Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Industries Corp., 544 U.S. 280, 283-84 (2005)
- District of Columbia Court of Appeals v. Feldman, 460 U.S. 462, 476 (1983)
- Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Co., 263 U.S. 413, 415 (1923)
- Noel v. Hall, 341 F.3d 1148, 1156, 1158, 1163 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Bell v. City of Boise, 709 F.3d 890, 897 (9th Cir. 2013)
- In re Gruntz, 202 F.3d 1074, 1079 (9th Cir. 2000)
- Moore v. County of Butte, 547 F. App'x 826, 829 (9th Cir. 2013)
- Riley v. Knowles, No. 1:16-CV-0057-JLT, 2016 WL 259336, at *3 (E.D. Cal. Jan. 21, 2016)
- Davis v. California Department of Child Services, No. 2:20-cv-01393-TLN-AC (PS), 2020 WL 5039243, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Aug. 26, 2020)
- West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 49 (1988)

- United States v. Classic, 313 U.S. 299, 326 (1941)
- Mullis v. U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the District of Nevada, 828 F.2d 1385, 1388 (9th Cir. 1987)
- Sacks v. Dietrich, 663 F.3d 1065 (9th Cir. 2011)
- Davenport v. Winley, 314 F. App'x 982 (9th Cir. 2009)
- Secress v. Ullman, 147 F. App'x 636, 638 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Polk County v. Dodson, 454 U.S. 312, 325 (1981)
- Briley v. California, 564 F.2d 849, 855 (9th Cir. 1977)
- George v. Smith, 507 F.3d 605, 607 (7th Cir. 2007)
- Lacey v. Maricopa County, 693 F.3d 896, 907 n.1 (9th Cir. 2012) (en banc)

OPINION

(PS) Ryan v. Fuentes

PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10 11 NATASHA J. RYAN, Case No. 2:25-cv-0925-DJC-JDP (PS) 12 Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER 14
 CARLOS FUENTES, et al., 15 Defendants. 16 17 18 19 Plaintiff Natasha Ryan has filed a
 complaint against Judge Alan Cassidy; mediator 20 Morgan Kramer; defense attorney Carlos
 Fuentes; the father of plaintiff's children, Vincent 21 Contreras III; Katherine Tynsdale,
 Contreras's girlfriend; several employees of the Modesto City 22 School District and Modesto
 Police Department, and the Stanislaus County Community Services 23 Agency. At its core,
 plaintiff's complaint is about her losing custody of her children. Her 24 complaint, however,
 cannot proceed past screening because this court lacks jurisdiction over the 25 issues plaintiff
 raises in her complaint. I will give plaintiff a chance to amend her complaint 26 before
 recommending dismissal of this case. I will also grant her application to proceed in forma 27
 pauperis, ECF No. 2, which makes the showing required by 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(a)(1) and (2). 28 1
 Screening and Pleading Requirements 2 A complaint must contain a short and plain statement that
 plaintiff is entitled to relief, 3 Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and provide "enough facts to state a claim to
 relief that is plausible on its 4 face," Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). The
 plausibility standard does not 5 require detailed allegations, but legal conclusions do not suffice.
 See Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 6 662, 678 (2009). If the allegations "do not permit the court to
 infer more than the mere 7 possibility of misconduct," the complaint states no claim. Id. at 679.
 The complaint need not 8 identify "a precise legal theory." Kobold v. Good Samaritan Reg'l Med.
 Ctr., 832 F.3d 1024, 9 1038 (9th Cir. 2016). Instead, what plaintiff must state is a "claim"—a set of
 "allegations that 10 give rise to an enforceable right to relief." Nagrampa v. MailCoups, Inc., 469
 F.3d 1257, 1264 11 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc) (citations omitted). 12 The court must construe a
 pro se litigant's complaint liberally. See Haines v. Kerner, 404 13 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per

curiam). The court may dismiss a pro se litigant's complaint "if it appears beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which would entitle him to relief." *Hayes v. Idaho Corr. Ctr.*, 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017). However, "a liberal interpretation of a civil rights complaint may not supply essential elements of the claim that were not initially pled." *Bruns v. Nat'l Credit Union Admin.*, 122 F.3d 1251, 1257 (9th Cir. 1997) (quoting *Ivey v. Bd. of Regents*, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)). Analysis The complaint alleges a myriad of grievances plaintiff has with several unrelated defendants. However, the overarching theme of her complaint is her child custody arraignment. According to the complaint, plaintiff had a custody hearing at the Stanislaus Superior Court in March of this year. ECF No. 1 at 5. When she arrived at the courthouse, she learned that the hearing was occurring online. *Id.* at 12. However, when she attempted to join the hearing, she had technical difficulties and was unable to participate. *Id.* Plaintiff lost custody of her children following the hearing. *Id.* This court does not have jurisdiction over child custody claims, which are exclusively matters of state law. See *Ankenbrandt v. Richards*, 504 U.S. 689, 702-04 (1992) (holding that the domestic relations exception to federal subject matter jurisdiction "divests the federal courts of power to issue divorce, alimony and child custody decrees"); see also *Peterson v. Babbitt*, 708 F.2d 465, 466 (9th Cir. 1983) (stating that "federal courts have uniformly held that they should not adjudicate cases involving domestic relations, including 'the custody of minors and a fortiori, right of visitation[']; the whole subject of domestic relations and particularly child custody problems is generally considered a state law matter"). "Even when a federal question is presented, federal courts decline to hear disputes [that] would deeply involve them in adjudicating domestic matters." *Thompson v. Thompson*, 798 F.2d 1547, 1558 (9th Cir. 1986). Further, this court lacks subject matter jurisdiction to review final determinations of state court custody proceedings. See *Worldwide Church of God v. McNair*, 805 F.2d 888, 890 (9th Cir. 1986) ("The United States District Court . . . has no authority to review the final determinations of a state court in judicial proceedings."). Under the Rooker-Feldman doctrine, a federal district court does not have subject matter jurisdiction to hear an appeal from the judgment of a state court. *Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Indus. Corp.*, 544 U.S. 280, 283-84 (2005); see also *Dist. of Columbia Ct. of Appeals v. Feldman*, 460 U.S. 462, 476 (1983); *Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Co.*, 263 U.S. 413, 415 (1923). To determine whether the Rooker-Feldman doctrine bars a case, a court must first determine if the federal action contains a forbidden de facto appeal of a state court judicial decision. *Noel v. Hall*, 341 F.3d 1148, 1156 (9th Cir. 2003). If it does not, "the Rooker-Feldman inquiry ends." *Bell v. City of Boise*, 709 F.3d 890, 897 (9th Cir. 2013). If a court determines that the action is a "forbidden de facto appeal," the court cannot hear the de facto appeal portion of the case, and, "[a]s part of that refusal, it must also refuse to decide any issue raised in the suit that is 'inextricably intertwined' with an issue resolved by the state court in its judicial decision." *Noel*, 341 F.3d at 1158; see also *Bell*, 709 F.3d at 897 ("The 'inextricably intertwined' language from Feldman is not a test

to determine whether a claim is a de facto 25 appeal, but is rather a second and distinct step in the Rooker-Feldman analysis.”). A complaint is 26 a “de facto appeal” of a state court decision where the plaintiff “complains of a legal wrong 27 allegedly committed by the state cour[t] and seeks relief from the judgment of that court.” Noel, 28 341 F.3d at 1163. 1 Plaintiff asks this court to invalidate a state court decision granting custody of her children 2 to her children’s father, defendant Contreras—a type of review that Rooker-Feldman squarely 3 prohibits. See *In re Gruntz*, 202 F.3d 1074, 1079 (9th Cir. 2000). A request to vacate a family 4 court order is generally considered a de facto appeal and barred by Rooker-Feldman. See *Moore v. Cnty. of Butte*, 547 F. App’x 826, 829 (9th Cir. 2013); *Riley v. Knowles*, No. 1:16-CV-0057- 6 JLT, 2016 WL 259336, at *3 (E.D. Cal. Jan. 21, 2016). Plaintiff’s action constitutes a “forbidden 7 de facto appeal,” and the court lacks subject matter jurisdiction. See *Davis v. California Dep’t of 8 Child Servs.*, No. 2:20-cv-01393-TLN-AC (PS), 2020 WL 5039243, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Aug. 26, 9 2020) (finding that plaintiff’s civil action regarding a state court’s child custody determination 10 constituted a forbidden “de facto appeal” that was barred by the Rooker-Feldman doctrine). 11 In addition, plaintiff’s complaint names several defendants who are not adequately alleged 12 to have acted under the color of state law or who are otherwise not proper defendants. For 13 example, plaintiff names her children’s father, defendant Contreras, and his girlfriend, defendant 14 Tynsdale, neither of whom were acting under the color of state law. “The traditional definition of 15 acting under color of state law requires that the defendant in a § 1983 action have exercised 16 power ‘possessed by virtue of state law and made possible only because the wrongdoer is clothed 17 with the authority of state law.’” *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 49 (1988) (quoting *United States v. 18 Classic*, 313 U.S. 299, 326 (1941)). 19 Defendant Judge Cassidy, defense attorney Carlos Fuentes, and mediator Kramer are also 20 not proper defendants. “[J]udges are absolutely immune from civil liability for damages for their 21 judicial acts.” *Mullis v. U.S. Bankr. Ct. for Dist. of Nevada*, 828 F.2d 1385, 1388 (9th Cir. 22 1987). Mediators enjoy the quasi-judicial immunity while acting within the scope of their 23 authority. See *Sacks v. Dietrich*, 663 F.3d 1065 (9th Cir. 2011); *Davenport v. Winley*, 314 F. 24 App’x 982 (9th Cir. 2009); *Secress v. Ullman*, 147 F. App’x 636, 638 (9th Cir. 2005) (finding 25 that the district court properly dismissed the private mediator appointed by the court because the 26 mediator enjoyed quasi-judicial immunity). 27 And criminal defense lawyers are not subject to liability under § 1983 for their handling of 28 criminal cases. See *Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 325 (1982) (public defenders do not act 1 under color of law for purposes of § 1983 liability); *Briley v. California*, 564 F.2d 849, 855 (9th 2 Cir. 1977) (privately retained attorneys do not act under color of law for purposes of § 1983 3 liability). 4 Finally, plaintiff names several defendants that appear to have no relation to her child 5 custody dispute. For example, plaintiff names a retired superintendent of the Modesto City 6 School District for failing to protect her sons from emotional harm, mental stress, and possible 7 post-traumatic stress disorder from an unknown situation. *Id.* at 8. Plaintiff also names Modesto 8 Police Officers for failing to arrest defendant Contreras after she reported him for domestic 9

violence. Id. at 10. Under Rule 20 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, a plaintiff cannot 10 bring unrelated claims against different defendants. See *George v. Smith*, 507 F.3d 605, 607 (7th 11 Cir. 2007) (“Unrelated claims against unrelated defendants belong in different suits.”). In other 12 words, a plaintiff cannot join claims against defendant B that have nothing to do with those 13 brought against defendant A. 14 I will allow plaintiff a chance to amend her complaint before recommending that this 15 action be dismissed. Plaintiff should also take care to add specific factual allegations against each 16 defendant. If plaintiff decides to file an amended complaint, the amended complaint will 17 supersede the current one. See *Lacey v. Maricopa Cnty.*, 693 F.3d 896, 907 n.1 (9th Cir. 2012) 18 (en banc). This means that the amended complaint will need to be complete on its face without 19 reference to the prior pleading. See E.D. Cal. Local Rule 220. Once an amended complaint is 20 filed, the current one no longer serves any function. Therefore, in an amended complaint, as in 21 the original, plaintiff will need to assert each claim and allege each defendant’s involvement in 22 sufficient detail. The amended complaint should be titled “First Amended Complaint” and refer 23 to the appropriate case number. If plaintiff does not file an amended complaint, I will 24 recommend that this action be dismissed. 25 Accordingly, it is hereby ORDERED that: 26 1. Plaintiff’s motion to proceed in forma pauperis, ECF No. 2, is GRANTED. 27 2. Plaintiff’s complaint, ECF No. 1, is DISMISSED with leave to amend. 28 3. Within thirty days from service of this order, plaintiff shall file either (1) an amended 1 | complaint or (2) notice of voluntary dismissal of this action without prejudice. 2 4. Failure to timely file either an amended complaint or notice of voluntary dismissal may 3 | result in the imposition of sanctions, including a recommendation that this action be dismissed 4 | with prejudice pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b). 5 5. The Clerk of Court shall send plaintiff a complaint form with this order. 6 7 IT IS SO ORDERED. Dated: _ April 29, 2025 q———

9 JEREMY D. PETERSON

10 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28