Januray 1973


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EQUAL PROTECTION AND STATE IMMUNITY FROM TORT LIABILITY

Krause v. State, 31 Ohio St. 2d 132
285 N.E.2d 736 (1972)

Allison Krause was shot to death during disturbances at Kent State University. The deceased's father brought a wrongful death action against the state of Ohio, alleging that agents of the state had acted negligently in sending armed, inadequately trained National Guardsmen to the campus. The trial court granted defendant's motion to dismiss on the ground that the state had not consented to be sued, and therefore was immune from tort liability. The court of appeals reversed, holding that the immunity doctrine violates the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment, and that the state is responsible for the tortious acts of its agents under the doctrine of respondeat superior. The Ohio Supreme Court reversed. Held: The provision of the Ohio constitution which permits the state to be sued only with the consent of the legislature does not violate the equal protection clause.

The English doctrine of sovereign immunity was adopted in the United States as a part of common law, and, in theory, served to bar


2. Ohio Const. art. I, § 16 provides:
   All courts shall be open, and every person, for an injury done him in his land, goods, person, or reputation, shall have remedy by due course of law, and shall have justice administered without delay. Suits may be brought against the state, in such courts and in such manner, as may be provided by law.


4. The doctrine began as a personal prerogative of the King of England. The maxim "the king can do no wrong" was, in practice, a jurisdictional bar to suits against the king in his courts. Equitable relief could be granted, however, through the king's consent to the use of a petition of right in the Court of Exchequer. See L. Ehrlich, Proceedings Against the Crown (1216-1377), at 123-27 (1921); F. Pollock & F. Maitland, The History of English Law 512-18 (1909 ed.). See generally G. Robinson, Public Authorities and Legal Liability (1925). In the sixteenth century courts extended the doctrine to protect the state as a whole. See R. Watkins, The State as Party Litigant 1-13 (1927); Barry, The King Can Do No Wrong, 11 Va. L. Rev. 349 (1925). See generally Holdsworth, The History of Remes-
suits against all governmental entities.\(^5\) To avoid the inequities of absolute adherence to the doctrine, most states enacted legislation to limit its application.\(^6\) The strictures of the immunity doctrine were relaxed.

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\(^6\) Justifications for the rule advanced by the United States Supreme Court were generally inadequate. E.g., Kawanamokoa v. Polybank, 205 U.S. 349, 353 (1907): A sovereign is exempt from suit, not because of any formal conception or obsolete theory, but on the logical and practical ground that there can be no legal right as against the authority that makes the law on which the right depends.

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The Siren, 74 U.S. (7 Wall.) 152, 154 (1869):
The doctrine rests upon reasons of public policy; the inconvenience and danger which would follow from any different rule. It is obvious that the public service would be hindered, and the public safety endangered, if the supreme authority could be subjected to suit at the instance of every citizen, and consequently controlled in the use and disposition of the means required for the proper administration of the government.


An illustrative example of the process of judicial enlargement of the doctrine is the development of privilege from liability in defamation cases. See Barr v. Matteo, 360 U.S. 564 (1959); Spalding v. Vilas, 161 U.S. 483 (1896); Bradley v. Fisher, 80 U.S. (13 Wall.) 335 (1871); Yaselli v. Goff, 12 F.2d 396 (2d Cir. 1926), *aff'd per curiam*, 275 U.S. 503 (1927). But see Greenwood v. Cobbe, 26 Neb. 449, 42 N.W. 413 (1889).

The state courts also applied the doctrine to state governments and all subdivisions thereof. For early examples, see State v. Hill, 54 Ala. 67 (1875); Mower v. Inhabitants of Leicester, 9 Mass. 247 (1812); Clodfelter v. State, 86 N.C. 51 (1882); Black v. Rempublicam, 6 Pa. (1 Yeates) 139 (1792); Clark v. State, 47 Tenn. (7 Cold.) 306 (1869); Commonwealth v. Colquhouns, 12 Va. (2 Hen. & Mun.) 213 (1808). Western states followed precedent, frequently without further rationale. See, e.g., Davis v. State, 30 Idaho 137, 163 P. 373 (1917); Albin Co. v. Commonwealth, 128 Ky. 295, 108 S.W. 299 (1908); Benda v. State, 109 Neb. 132, 190 N.W. 211 (1922); Billings v. State, 27 Wash. 288, 67 P. 583 (1902); State *ex rel.* Harney v. Hastings, 12 Wis. 664 (1860). For the judicial origins of the doctrine in Ohio, see State *ex rel.* Parrott v. Board of Pub. Works, 36 Ohio St. 409 (1881); Miers v. Turnpike Co., 11 Ohio 273 (1842); State v. Franklin Bank, 10 Ohio 91 (1840).

6. See generally Note, *Administration of Claims Against the Sovereign—A Sur-

by three general means: (1) limited consent to sue through the existing judicial system;\(^7\) (2) creation of administrative agencies to hear claims against the state;\(^8\) or (3) direct disposition of claims by the legislature.\(^9\)

In addition, courts, moving away from strict application of the doctrine, have created exceptions to the general rule of immunity.\(^10\) Most courts permit recovery for torts arising in the course of "proprietary," as opposed to "governmental," functions,\(^11\) or out of "ministerial," as

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opposed to "discretionary," acts.\textsuperscript{12} States may "consent" to be sued, or "waive" the immunity defense.\textsuperscript{13} Some courts refuse to sustain the defense in nuisance\textsuperscript{14} or contract\textsuperscript{15} actions, and in some jurisdictions the state's immunity does not extend to its agents.\textsuperscript{16}
In a growing minority of states, courts have attempted to abolish the doctrine on non-constitutional grounds. In these states the legislatures have, as a rule, responded by enacting statutes which either codify, or restrict the effect of, the courts' decisions.\textsuperscript{17}

A 1912 amendment to the Ohio constitution\textsuperscript{18} abolished the common law defense of governmental immunity and authorized suits against the state "in such courts and in such manner" as the legislature


For cases in which courts have subsequently retreated, see City & County of Denver v. Madison, 142 Colo. 1, 351 P.2d 826 (1960); Perkins v. State, 251 N.E.2d 30 (Ind. 1969); cf. State v. Shinkle, 231 Ore. 328, 373 P.2d 674 (1962).


\textsuperscript{18} OHIO CONST. art. I, § 16.
might provide. Although an administrative agency was organized in 1917 to hear certain claims against the state,\(^\text{19}\) the Ohio General Assembly has never passed general enabling legislation permitting the use of Ohio's courts for such claims.\(^\text{20}\) Holding the amendment to be permissive rather than self-executing,\(^\text{21}\) courts continued to recognize immunity as a defense.\(^\text{22}\)

In Ohio, immunity creates two classifications: first, the distinction between plaintiffs injured by governmental and by non-governmental tort-feasors; and secondly, the distinction between plaintiffs injured by governmental tort-feasors in the exercise of excepted and of non-excepted activities. The United States Supreme Court has established two

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\(^{19}\) OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 127.11 (Page 1953). The "Sundry Claims Board" is authorized to award only up to $1,000; there is no provision for trial by jury or appellate review. The General Assembly is free to overrule the Board's recommendations by refusing to appropriate funds from the treasury. See generally Walsh, The Ohio Sundry Claims Board, 9 OHIO ST. L.J. 437 (1948).

\(^{20}\) For examples of isolated legislative exceptions to immunity in Ohio, see OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 111.19 (Page 1953) (fees paid under protest); id. § 1523.10 (1964) (fees on water conservation bonds); id. § 5301.24 (1970) (foreclosure sales). See generally Note, Claims Against the State of Ohio: The Need for Reform, 36 U. CIN. L. REV. 239 (1971).

\(^{21}\) That is, the courts held that the 1912 amendment by itself did not grant the right to sue the state, but only authorized the legislature to so grant. Since the legislature has not granted the right, the immunity defense is still available. See, e.g., Farkas v. Fulton, 130 Ohio St. 390, 199 N.E. 850 (1936); Raudabaugh v. State, 96 Ohio St. 513, 118 N.E. 102 (1917). See also 1 & 2 PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION OF THE STATE OF OHIO (1912).

\(^{22}\) Schaffer v. Board of Trustees, 171 Ohio St. 228, 168 N.E.2d 547 (1960); Wolf v. Ohio State Univ. Hosp., 170 Ohio St. 49, 162 N.E.2d 475 (1959); Palumbo v. Industrial Comm'n, 140 Ohio St. 54, 42 N.E.2d 766 (1942); Aldrich v. City of Youngstown, 106 Ohio St. 342, 140 N.E. 164 (1922). Liability in Ohio's political subdivisions and municipalities is predicated on the governmental-proprietary functions test. For examples of the confusion created by this test, see Moloney v. City of Columbus, 2 Ohio St. 2d 213, 208 N.E.2d 141 (1965) (zoo—proprietary); Hyde v. City of Lakewood, 2 Ohio St. 2d 155, 207 N.E.2d 547 (1965) (non-profit hospital—governmental); Hack v. City of Salem, 174 Ohio St. 383, 189 N.E.2d 857 (1963) (swimming pool—proprietary); Eversole v. City of Columbus, 169 Ohio St. 205, 158 N.E.2d 515 (1959) (arts and crafts center—proprietary); Broughton v. City of Cleveland, 167 Ohio St. 29, 146 N.E.2d 301 (1957) (garbage disposal—governmental); City of Cleveland v. Board of Tax Appeals, 153 Ohio St. 97, 91 N.E.2d 480 (1950) (parking lot—proprietary); Doud v. City of Cincinnati, 152 Ohio St. 132, 87 N.E.2d 243 (1949) (maintenance of sewers—proprietary); State ex rel. Gordon v. Taylor, 149 Ohio St. 427, 79 N.E.2d 127 (1948) (sewer construction—governmental); Selden v. City of Cuyahoga Falls, 132 Ohio St. 223, 6 N.E.2d 976 (1937) (maintenance of swimming pool—governmental); State ex rel. White v. City of Cleveland, 125 Ohio St. 230, 181 N.E. 24 (1932) (maintenance of music hall—proprietary); City of Wooster v. Arbenz, 116 Ohio St. 281, 156 N.E. 210 (1927) (street maintenance—governmental).
tests for determining whether legislative classifications violate the equal protection clause. First, while a state is permitted considerable latitude to classify people within its jurisdiction, the classification must bear at least a "reasonable relation" to the purpose of the legislation. 23 Secondly, if the classification is either based on "suspect criteria," such as race, or affects a "fundamental right," a stricter test is applied: there must be a "compelling state interest" or "substantial justification" for creating or enforcing the classification. 24

Applying the "reasonable relation" test, the majority in Krause found a rational basis for each classification. First, the court stated that, although plaintiffs with identical causes of action may be distinguished in Ohio solely on the basis of whether the defendant is a public or private party, it would not "preclude the combined legislative judgment that there may be substantive differences between the two types of conduct," public and private. 25 Secondly, the court found that the exceptions to immunity for proprietary functions had been applied by Ohio courts only to local political entities and not to the state itself, and that


[T]he classification must be reasonable, not arbitrary, and must rest upon some ground of difference having a fair and substantial relation to the object of the legislation, so that all persons similarly circumstanced shall be treated alike.


[We] reject appellants' argument that a mere showing of a rational relationship between the waiting period [for eligibility in a state welfare program] and these four admittedly permissible state objectives will suffice to justify the classification. . . . [I]n moving . . . appellees were exercising a constitutional right, and any classification which serves to penalize the exercise of that right, unless shown to be necessary to promote a compelling governmental interest, is unconstitutional.


"sufficient substantive differences" exist between state and local governments to justify different treatment.\(^{26}\)

The "reasonable relation" test is founded upon judicial deference to legislative choice. Even when the state has failed to demonstrate a rational basis, classifications have been upheld if the court can construct one.\(^{27}\) Thus, the majority in Krause was satisfied that immunity was constitutionally permissible after hypothesizing sufficient differences between private, state, and municipal parties to support their different statuses as defendants in tort actions.

The dissent in Krause, however, reasoned that the right of access to the courts\(^{28}\) is as basic as any of the "fundamental rights" recognized by the Supreme Court. Because immunity has the legal effect of denying that right to some, the dissent concluded that the immunity doctrine must be closely scrutinized under the stricter equal protection test.\(^{29}\) While the state is not required to treat things which are "different in fact" as though they were the same, the determination of whether they are different should be based on the "underlying substantive conduct involved, and not the status of the party-defendant, when a denial of due process is involved."\(^{30}\) The dissent rejected the state's

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26. 31 Ohio St. 2d at 146, 285 N.E.2d at 745:

Whether it is the nature of the conduct or activity undertaken, or the differences in its governmental and corporate existence, we need not now explore. These substantive differences permit of different remedies and defenses.


The constitutional safeguard is offended only if the classification rests on grounds wholly irrelevant to the achievement of the State's objective. State legislatures are presumed to have acted within their constitutional power despite the fact that, in practice, their laws result in some inequality. A statutory discrimination will not be set aside if any state of facts reasonably may be conceived to justify it.


29. 31 Ohio St. 2d at 151, 285 N.E.2d at 747-48 (dissenting opinion) (emphasis original):

A classification that discriminates with respect to a right of very great importance is not to be sustained merely because the classification has a rational basis; if the state fails to supply a substantial justification, its discrimination is invidious and unconstitutional.

30. Id. at 153, 285 N.E.2d at 749 (emphasis original).

argument that abrogating immunity would impair the function of state government, pointing out that governments in states where immunity has been eliminated "are still able to provide the functions and services necessary in a modern society . . . ." The dissent noted that increased costs to state government, in any event, are not a sufficient justification for denial of equal protection. The dissent concluded that the doctrine of respondeat superior should apply because the state failed to carry its burden of demonstrating a compelling interest in barring suits by its residents.

The analyses in Krause reflect a basic problem in the present status of equal protection litigation, namely, the inadequacy of standards for determining which test to apply. The Supreme Court has clearly established only three major "fundamental interests" to be protected by the stricter test: voting, interstate travel, and criminal appeals. Recent decisions indicate that the present Court will not readily extend this test into new areas. When the interest affected is founded on express constitutional grounds—for example, free speech—it carries its own safeguards. But just what rights not explicitly guaranteed by the Constitution warrant special treatment is unclear.

31. Id. at 155, 285 N.E.2d at 750.
37. See, e.g., Police Dep't v. Mosley, 408 U.S. 92 (1972).
38. For example, in Shapiro v. Thompson, 394 U.S. 618 (1969), the Court in effect recognized a "constitutional right to travel interstate," without specifying the constitutional ground from which the right derived:

This Court long ago recognized that the nature of our Federal Union and our constitutional concepts of personal liberty unite to require that all citi-
At the same time, the Court is increasingly less willing to conjecture as to a state's reasons for classifying; even under the "reasonable relation" test, judicial scrutiny is becoming more vigorous. For example, in Reed v. Reed the Court invalidated an Idaho statute which gave mandatory preference to men over women in the selection of administrators for decedents' estates. Rather than expanding the stricter test to include sex as a "suspect" criterion, the Court found the statute "arbitrary" under the "reasonable relation" test, although the state had argued that the preference made the selection process more efficient by eliminating hearings on the merits and avoided intra-family disputes—reasons clearly sufficient under older "reasonable relation" interpretations to support the classification.

Because the Supreme Court's use of the equal protection tests does not provide clear guidance, the Krause majority's choice of the "reasonable relation" test over the stricter test may be justifiable. Even under the "reasonable relation" test, however, the court should have exam-
ined more closely the rationality of the classifications created by immunity under Ohio law. 42

42. For example, immunity may be viewed in two ways: from an economic point of view, as a means of protecting the state from the burden of defending lawsuits; and from a personal rights point of view, as preventing individuals from adjudicating tort claims. The first view leads to the "reasonable relation" test, the second to the stricter test. Even assuming that the economic view should prevail, the recent "reasonable relation" cases seem to require an investigation of the relationship between Ohio's financial structure and capacity to perform needed services, and the immunity doctrine, particularly in light of its inconsistent exceptions. See note 22 supra.