Queen v. M'Naghten

10 Clark & F.200, 2 Eng. Rep. 718 (H.L. 1843)

Facts

Daniel M'Naghten believed he was persecuted by Tories, and he sought to assassinate Prime Minister Robert Peel. Failing to accurately identify Peel from behind, he inadvertently shot the Prime Minister's secretary, Edward Drummond, who died several weeks later. M'Naghten pleaded not guilty. Witnesses testified regarding M'Naghten's mental state at trial, and he was found not guilty, on the grounds of insanity. This verdict created a public outcry regarding the insanity defense, and the issue was debated in the House of Lords. As a result, several questions were posed by the House of Lords to the British judiciary. The responses were crafted into the M'Naghten Rules in Britain, and remain in force.

Issue

Specific questions to be addressed by the judiciary included the following: What is the proper standard for insanity? What questions should be posed to the jury, and how should the jury be instructed? What is the proper role of the medical professional?

Holding

The most important result of this case is the wording of the "M'Naghten standard" for insanity. The case held:

> to establish a defense on the ground of insanity, it must be clearly proved that, at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or, if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong.

Analysis

Although over 160 years old, this case remains among the most widely cited in mental health law. The resultant "M'Naghten standard" is the most prevalent standard of insanity in the United States.

Edited Excerpts[1]

The prisoner had been indicted for that he, on the 20th day of January 1843, did kill and murder Edward Drummond. The prisoner pleaded Not guilty.

Witnesses were called on the part of the prisoner, to prove that he was not, at the time of committing this act, in a sound state of mind. The medical evidence was in substance this: That persons of otherwise sound mind, might be affected by morbid delusions: that the prisoner was in that condition: that a person so labouring under a morbid delusion, might have a moral perception of right and wrong, but that in the case of the prisoner it was a delusion which carried him away beyond the power of his own control, and left him no such perception; and that he was not capable of exercising any control over acts which had connection with his delusion: that it was the nature of the disease with which the prisoner was affected, to go on gradually until it had reached a climax, when it burst forth with irresistible insanity: that a man might go on for years quietly, though at the same time under its influence, but would all at once break out into the most extravagant and violent paroxysms.

Some of the witnesses who gave this evidence, had previously examined the prisoner: others had never seen him till he appeared in Court, and they formed their opinions on hearing the evidence given by the other witnesses.

Lord Chief Justice Tindal: The question to be determined is, whether at the time the act in question was committed, the prisoner had or had not the use of his understanding, so as to know that what he was doing was a wrong or wicked act. If the jurors should be of the opinion that the prisoner was not sensible, at the time he committed it, that he was violating the laws both of God and man, then he would be entitled to a verdict in his favor; but, if on the contrary, they were of the opinion that when he committed the act he was in a sound state of mind, then their verdict must be against him.

Verdict, Not guilty, on the ground of insanity.

This verdict and the question of the nature and extent of the unsoundness of mind which would excuse the commission of a felony of this sort, [was] made the subject of debate in the House of Lords. Accordingly, all the Judges attended their Lordships, [and] the following questions of law were propounded to them:

1st. What is the law respecting alleged crimes committed by persons afflicted with insane delusion, in respect of one or more particular subjects or persons: as, for instance, where at the time of the commission of the alleged crime, the accused knew he was acting contrary to law but did the act complained of with a view, under the influence of insane delusion, of redressing or revenging some supposed grievance or injury, or of producing some supposed public benefit?

2nd. What are the proper questions to be submitted to the jury, when a person alleged to be afflicted with insane delusions respecting one or more particular subjects or persons, is charged with the commission of a crime (murder, for example), and insanity is set up as a defense?

3rd. In what terms ought the question to be left to the jury, as to the prisoner's state of mind at the time when the act was committed?

4th. If a person under an insane delusion as to existing facts, commits an offense in consequence thereof, is he thereby excused?

5th. Can a medical man conversant with the disease of insanity, who never saw the prisoner previously to trial, but who was present during the whole trial and the examination of all the witnesses, be asked his opinion as to the state of the prisoner's mind at the time of the commission of the alleged crime, or his opinion whether the prisoner was conscious at the time of doing the act, that he was acting contrary to law, or whether he was laboring under any and what delusion at the time?

[Various replies among the Judges]

What is the law respecting the alleged crime, when at the time of the commission of it, the accused knew he was acting contrary to the law, but did the act with a view, under the influence of insane delusion, of redressing or revenging some supposed grievance or injury, or of producing some supposed public benefit? If I were to understand this question according to the strict meaning of its terms, it would require, in order to answer it, a solution of all questions of law which could arise on the circumstances stated in the question, either by explicitly stating and answering such questions, or by stating some principles or rules which would suffice for their solution. I am quite unable to do so, and, indeed, doubt whether it be possible to be done; and therefore request to be permitted to answer the question only so far as it comprehends the question, whether a person, circumstanced as stated in the question, is, for that reason only, to be found not guilty of a crime respecting which the question of his guilt has been duly raised in a criminal proceeding and I am of the opinion that he is not. There is no law, that I am aware of, that makes persons in the state described in the question not responsible for their criminal acts. To render a person irresponsible for crime on account of

unsoundness of mind, the unsoundness should, according to the law as it has long been understood and held, be such as rendered him incapable of knowing right from wrong. The terms used in the question cannot be said (with reference only to the use of language) to be equivalent to a description of this kind and degree of unsoundness of mind. If the state described in the question be one which involves or is necessarily connected with such an unsoundness, this is not a matter of law but of physiology, and not of that obvious and familiar kind as to be inferred without proof.

The questions necessarily to be submitted to the jury, are those questions of fact which are raised on the record. In a criminal trial, the question commonly is, whether the accused be guilty or not guilty; but, in order to assist the jury in coming to a right conclusion on this necessary and ultimate question, it is usual and proper to submit such subordinate or intermediate questions, as the course which the trial has taken may have made it convenient to direct their attention to. What those questions are, and the manner of submitting them, is a matter of discretion for the Judge: a discretion to be guided by a consideration of all the circumstances attending the inquiry. In performing this duty, it is sometimes necessary or convenient to inform the jury as to the law; and if, on a trial such as is suggested in the question, he should have occasion to state what kind and degree of insanity would amount to a defense, it should be stated conformably to what I have mentioned in my answer to the first question, as being, in my opinion, the law on this subject.

In answer to [the first] question, assuming that your Lordships' inquiries are confined to those persons who labor under such partial delusions only, and are not in other respects insane, we are of the opinion that, notwithstanding the party accused did the act complained of with a view, under the influence of insane delusion, or redressing or revenging some supposed grievance or injury, or of producing some public benefit, he is nevertheless punishable according to the nature of the crime committed if he knew at the time of committing such crime that he was acting contrary to law; by which expression we understand your Lordships to mean the law of the land.

He is nevertheless punishable according to the nature of the crime committed if he knew at the time of committing such crime that he was acting contrary to law.

[The second and third] questions appear to us to be more conveniently answered together, we have to submit our opinion to be, that the jurors ought to be told in all cases that every man is to be presumed to be sane, and to possess a sufficient degree of reason to be responsible for his crimes, until the contrary be proved to their satisfaction; and that to establish a defense on the ground of insanity, it must be clearly proved that, at the time of the committing of the act, the party accused was laboring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or, if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong. The mode putting the latter part of the question to the jury on these occasions has generally been, whether the accused at the time of doing the act knew the difference between right and wrong: which mode, though rarely, if ever, leading to any mistake with the jury, is not, as we conceive, so accurate when put generally and in the abstract, as when put with reference to the party's knowledge of right and wrong in respect to the very act with which he is charged. If the question were to be put as to the knowledge of the accused solely and exclusively to the law of the land, it might tend to confound the jury, by inducing them to believe that an actual knowledge of the law of the land was essential in order to lead to a conviction; whereas the law is administered upon the principle that every one must be taken conclusively to know it, without proof that he does know it. If the accused was conscious that the act was one which he ought not to do, and if that act was at the same time contrary to the law of the land, he is punishable; and the usual course thereof has been to leave the question to the jury, whether the party accused had a sufficient degree of reason to know that he was doing an act that was wrong: and this course we think is correct, accompanied by such observations and explanations as the circumstances of each particular case may require.

The mode putting the latter part of the question to the jury on these occasions has generally been, whether the accused at the time of doing the act knew the difference between right and wrong.

[The answer to the fourth question] must of course depend on the nature of the delusion: but, making the same assumption as we did before, namely, that he labors under such partial delusion only, and is not in other respects insane, we think he must be considered in the same situation as to responsibility as if the facts with respect to the delusion were real. For example, if under the influence of his delusion he supposes another

man to be in the act of attempting to take away his life, and he kills that man, as he supposes, in self-defense, he would be exempt from punishment. If his delusion was that the deceased had inflicted a serious injury to his character and fortune, and he killed him in revenge for such supposed injury, he would be liable to punishment.

In answer [to the last question] we state to your Lordships, that we think the medical man, under the circumstances supposed, cannot in strictness be asked his opinion in the terms above stated, because each of those questions involves the determination of the truth of the facts deposed to, which it is for the jury to decide, and the questions are not mere questions upon a matter of science, in which case such evidence is admissible. But where the facts are admitted or not disputed, and the question becomes substantially one of science only, it may be convenient to allow the question to be put in that general form, though the same cannot be insisted on as a matter of right.