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Ford v. Wainwright

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Definition

In 1986 in Florida, Alvin Ford, the defendant, was convicted of a capital offense and was sentenced to death. During his tenure on death row, the issue of his mental health and competency to proceed surfaced. At the time of the conviction, Florida's state procedure did not allow an adversarial or judicial determination of a defendant's competency to be executed because the determination was made by the governor with the aid of a panel of mental health professionals. However, the US Supreme Court ruled that Florida's competency procedure was unconstitutional and asserted that executing a person not competent as a result of mental health issues represented violation of the Eighth Amendment right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment. Moreover, it noted that of the states having death penalty legislation at the time, 26 statutes explicitly barred the execution of the "insane." The Supreme Court ruled that executing someone who is not competent due to mental health issues: (1) has questionable retributive value, (2) has no deterrence value, and (3) simply affronts humanity. In this ruling, the

US Supreme Court did not expand upon specific facets of competency to be executed beyond those laid out by the *Dusky* requirements. The court ruled that the person must possess the mental capacity to understand the nature of the death penalty and why it is utilized. Moreover, the defendant must understand the link between the crime and the punishment rendered.

Cross-References

- [Dusky v. United States, 1960](#)
- [Estelle v. Smith \(1981\)](#)

References and Readings

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- Dusky v. U.S.*, 362 U.S. 402 (1960).
- Estelle v. Smith*, 451 U.S. 454 (1981).
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