Developmental Detour: How the Minimalism of Miller V. Alabama Led the Court's "Kids Are Different" Eighth Amendment Jurisprudence Down a Blind Alley

Mary E. Berkheiser

University of Nevada, Las Vegas – William S. Boyd School of Law

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DEVELOPMENTAL DETOUR: HOW THE MINIMALISM OF MILLER V. ALABAMA LED THE COURT’S “KIDS ARE DIFFERENT” EIGHTH AMENDMENT JURISPRUDENCE DOWN A BLIND ALLEY

Mary Berkheiser*†

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The juvenile justice community applauded the Supreme Court’s decision in Miller v. Alabama, which struck down mandatory life without parole sentences for all juvenile homicide offenders. No longer will courts be required to condemn to death in prison persons not yet adults for homicides committed in their youth. Instead, sentencers now must consider the mitigating factors that are the essence of childhood and adolescence and that animate the lives of young offenders. In this respect, the Court followed Graham v. Florida and once again traversed

* Professor of Law, Director of Clinical Programs, and Director of Juvenile Justice Clinic, William S. Boyd School of Law, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.
† I want to thank the Boyd School of Law for its financial support, and I am especially grateful for the invaluable assistance of our library director, Jeanne Price, and my research assistant, Laura Welzig.
4. Id. at 2467-68.
the divide between capital and noncapital cases, granting to noncapital defendants the individualized consideration in sentencing historically reserved for those facing the death penalty. To be sure, this is an advance for those facing the harshest of all penalties for the young. But it is only a step forward. The Miller Court opted for the narrower of two rulings sought by petitioners Evan Miller and Kuntrell Jackson. Instead of striking down all life without parole sentences for juveniles as cruel and unusual, the Court merely banned the mandatory imposition of that harshest of all penalties constitutionally permissible for minors convicted of murder. Thus, it remains constitutional even for fourteen-year-olds like Evan Miller and Kuntrell Jackson to be sentenced to life without parole, so long as they receive individualized consideration at sentencing. Given the developmental factors setting juveniles apart from adults, as recognized first by Roper v. Simmons in 2005 and then by Graham five years later, the requirement that those who sentence consider young defendants' individual histories is an important development.

History has shown, however, that the individualized consideration now required before sentencing our young to death in prison is no friend to youth. Before the Supreme Court banned the death penalty for those under eighteen years of age, it had long required each of the youthful offenders who populated death row (or were executed before Roper) to receive the same individualized consideration the Court has now mandated before the imposition of a sentence of life without parole on a

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8. See David R. Dow, Don’t Believe the Hype: Supreme Court Decision on Juvenile Life Without Parole Is Weak, THE DAILY BEAST (June 25, 2012, 5:38 PM EDT), http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/06/25/don-t-believe-the-hype-supreme-court-decision-on-juvenile-life-without-parole-is-weak.html (criticizing the ruling as being "tepid and narrow," failing "to do anything morally important," and representing "incrementalism at its worst" and opining that "you have to have awfully low standards to think this decision marks much by way of progress when it comes to criminal punishment.").
10. Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2469.
11. Id.
After considering the mitigating factors owing to their youth, none of the juvenile offenders in these cases were saved from society’s harshest penalty. There is little reason to believe that Evan Miller or Kuntrell Jackson will fare any better. With its narrow ruling, Miller has taken the Eighth Amendment kids are different jurisprudence on a deleterious detour that could lead Miller and Jackson and others like them to a certain dead end.

Where Miller went wrong is the subject of this paper. It begins with Graham and the significance of the Court’s ruling that the Eighth Amendment categorically precludes imposition of a sentence of life without parole on a juvenile nonhomicide offender. Next, this paper turns to the Supreme Court’s decision in Miller, parsing the Court’s reliance on precedent and the reasoning that led it to adopt a ruling that stops short of a categorical ban on life without parole for all juvenile homicide offenders. This paper then launches a critique of Miller, arguing that it is both unprincipled and unsound because of its failure to rule categorically that the Eighth Amendment prohibits the imposition of life without parole on a juvenile regardless of the crime. This paper concludes by offering as an explanation for the Court’s limited ruling the judicial minimalism that characterizes the Roberts Court and by explaining how minimalism fails the criminal justice system in this case.

I. THE SETTING: GRAHAM V. FLORIDA

The Supreme Court’s landmark 2010 decision, Graham v. Florida, set the stage for Miller. Like Miller, Graham was a challenge to a noncapital sentence—a sentence of life without parole for a juvenile nonhomicide offender. To grant relief to those juvenile offenders, the Court first had to stare down its noncapital Eighth Amendment jurisprudence and forge an alternate route. The reigning precedent for
the Supreme Court's noncapital Eighth Amendment jurisprudence was then and remains today Harmelin v. Michigan,\textsuperscript{20} which abandoned the three-part proportionality analysis adopted by Solem v. Helm\textsuperscript{21} and established a "gross disproportionality" standard as the threshold consideration.\textsuperscript{22} In the more than two decades between Harmelin and Graham, the Supreme Court had applied Harmelin only twice, ruling in both cases that sentences of twenty-five years to life for minor property offenses under California’s "three strikes" law were not grossly disproportionate and, therefore, passed constitutional muster.\textsuperscript{23}

Graham rejected Harmelin's niggardly approach and plotted a different course.\textsuperscript{24} In an historic stride, the Graham Court applied the thorough-going analysis traditionally reserved for death penalty cases to the life without parole sentence Terrence Graham had received for the crime of armed burglary.\textsuperscript{25} The Court did so, it said, because Graham had challenged an entire sentencing practice and not just the sentence imposed on him.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, the proper analysis was that employed in other cases establishing categorical rules, even though all of those cases had

\textsuperscript{21} 463 U.S. 277, 290-92 (1983) (setting out three factors to guide noncapital proportionality review: (1) the gravity of the offense and the harshness of the penalty, (2) comparison of the sentences imposed on other criminals in the same jurisdiction, and (3) comparison of the sentences imposed for the same crime in other jurisdictions). See Harmelin, 501 U.S. at 965 (opinion by Scalia, J., joined by Rehnquist, C.J.) (explicitly rejecting the Solem three-part test).
\textsuperscript{22} Harmelin, 501 U.S. at 1005 (Kennedy, J., concurring) (concluding that to get to the intrastate and interstate comparisons required by Solem, the Court first had to determine that the sentence was "grossly disproportionate" to the crime).
\textsuperscript{23} See Lockyer v. Andrade, 538 U.S. 63, 77 (2003) (stating that the gross disproportionality principle was to be reserved for the "extraordinary case," and Andrade's two consecutive terms of twenty-five years to life for shoplifting videotapes valued at approximately $150 was not such a case); Ewing v. California, 538 U.S. 11, 30 (2003) (plurality opinion) (recognizing that Ewing's twenty-five years to life sentence for stealing golf clubs valued at slightly less than $1,200 was long, but not grossly disproportionate).
\textsuperscript{24} 130 S. Ct. 2011, 2022-23 (2010).
\textsuperscript{25} Id.
\textsuperscript{26} Id. at 2022.
involved the death penalty. Of the three most recent cases adopting categorical rules, the first was *Atkins v. Virginia*, in which the Court ruled that the Eighth Amendment prohibited the death penalty for a mentally retarded individual. The second case, *Roper v. Simmons*, held similarly that executing one who committed his crime before the age of eighteen was cruel and unusual and, therefore, unconstitutional. Finally, *Kennedy v. Louisiana* established that the death penalty for the rape of a child was off-limits under the Eighth Amendment. All three cases, like *Graham*, were categorical challenges to sentences imposed on a certain category of offenders or for a certain category of offenses. The fact that all three were death penalty cases did not give the *Graham* Court pause because what mattered was that the challenge embraced all juveniles as a category of nonhomicide offenders.

Following *Graham*’s lead, Evan Miller and Kuntrell Jackson raised categorical challenges to the mandatory life without parole sentences they received after being convicted of murder. They also challenged the mandatory nature of their life without parole sentences. Although the Court ultimately ruled in their favor, they did not receive the full measure of relief they had sought. Nor did the Court’s decision live up to the promise of *Roper* and *Graham*’s kids are different Eighth Amendment jurisprudence.

II. THE DECISION

The *Miller* Court began and ended its legal analysis by looking to *Roper* and *Graham*. Front and center in that analysis was the proportionality requirement of the Eighth Amendment. The Court quoted *Roper* for the century-old “‘precept of justice that punishment for a crime should be graduated and proportioned’ to both the offender and the offense.” Only in this way, the Court declared, is the Eighth

27. Id. at 2022-23.
31. See Guggenheim, supra note 19, at 461 (arguing that, given the weaknesses in Justice Kennedy’s finding of a national consensus against the use of life without parole for juvenile nonhomicide offenders, “one can confidently say . . . that the majority felt strongly that this punishment is morally wrong.”).
32. Miller Petition, supra note 9, at 9-25; Jackson Petition, supra note 9, at 8-25.
33. Miller Petition, supra note 9, at 26-29; Jackson Petition, supra note 9, at 31-35.
35. Id. (quoting *Roper*, 543 U.S. at 560 (quoting Weems v. United States, 217 U.S. 349, 367 (1910)).
Amendment right of every individual “not to be subjected to excessive sanctions” guaranteed.  

With proportionality as its lodestar, the Court then pivoted to two strands of sentencing precedent. As it had done for the first time in Graham, the Court looked to its death penalty jurisprudence for guidance in this non-death case. Turning first to its cases that had adopted categorical prohibitions on sentencing, the Court cited its most recent trilogy of capital cases, in which it had put the death penalty off-limits for mentally retarded persons, for juvenile offenders, and for the crime of raping a child. The Court then recognized that, with Graham, it had held that the same categorical bar applied to the noncapital sentence of life without parole for nonhomicide offenses imposed on juvenile offenders. In part, because Graham had “likened life without parole for juveniles to the death penalty,” the Miller Court extended its reach into death penalty law by embracing a second line of precedents that barred mandatory death sentences and required individualized consideration of the details of both the offender and the offense. It was the “confluence of these two lines of precedent” that led the Court to conclude that the Eighth Amendment prohibits mandatory life without parole sentences for juvenile homicide offenders.

The Court took care to demonstrate that the principles that first

36. Id. (quoting Roper, 543 U.S. at 560).
37. Id.
38. See Berkheiser, Death Is Not So Different, supra note 19, at 5-7 (discussing the Court’s original reliance on death penalty cases to decide an Eighth Amendment challenge to a non-death case); Alison Siegler & Barry Sullivan, “Death is Different” No Longer: Graham v. Florida and the Future of Eighth Amendment Challenges to Noncapital Sentences, 2010 SUP. CT. REV. 327 (2010) (discussing the Court’s decision in Graham to apply the categorical approach to a noncapital case); Robert Smith & G. Ben Cohen, Redemption Song: Graham v. Florida and the Evolving Eighth Amendment Jurisprudence, 108 MICH. L. REV. FIRST IMPRESSIONS 86 (2010) (noting application of categorical exclusions to nonhomicide offenses committed by juveniles).
40. Id. at 2463 (citing Atkins v. Virginia, 536 U.S. 304 (2002)).
41. Id. (citing Roper v. Simmons, 543 U.S. 551 (2005)).
42. Id. (citing Kennedy v. Louisiana, 554 U.S. 407 (2008)).
43. Id. (citing Graham v. Florida, 130 S. Ct. 2011 (2010)).
44. Id.
45. Id. at 2455 (citing Woodson v. North Carolina, 428 U.S. 280, 304 (1976) (plurality opinion) (striking down mandatory death penalty because it did not permit consideration of individual characteristics of the offender or the circumstances of the offense and excluded from consideration “the possibility of compassionate or mitigating factors”); Lockett v. Ohio, 438 U.S. 586 (1978) (plurality opinion) (striking down Ohio death penalty statute because it did not permit the type of individualized consideration of mitigating factors required by the Eighth Amendment).
46. Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2464.
guided Roper and then Graham applied with equal force to life without parole sentences for homicides: “none of what [Graham] said about children—about their distinctive (and transitory) mental traits and environmental vulnerabilities—is crime-specific.”

However, the Court stopped short of the categorical ruling it rendered in Graham. The Court announced that although “Graham’s reasoning implicates any life-without-parole sentence imposed on a juvenile, . . . its categorical ban relates only to nonhomicide offenses.”

Instead of a categorical ruling against all life without parole sentences for juveniles, the Court adopted a ban only on the mandatory imposition of such sentences.

As the foundation for that ban, the Court cataloged in detail what has now become unassailable—that juveniles are “constitutionally different from adults for purposes of sentencing.” Calling upon Roper and Graham, the Court recognized, as those cases had, “three significant gaps between juveniles and adults”: first, juveniles lack maturity and a developed sense of responsibility, leading to “recklessness, impulsivity, and heedless risk-taking”; second, juveniles are more vulnerable to peer pressures and other negative influences and cannot leave their often terrible home environments; and third, juveniles’ characters are not as established as adults. These differences, the Court said, cause juveniles to have diminished culpability and stronger prospects for reform than adults, and thus make them “less deserving of the most severe punishments.”

Nonetheless, after the Court’s ruling, all juveniles convicted of homicides still may face a sentence of life without parole, which means certain death in prison. The difference pre- and post-Miller is in the details.

The rationale for the Court’s rejection of the categorical ruling sought by both Miller and Jackson is not transparent, but the reason for

47. Id. at 2465.
48. Id.
49. Id. at 2475.
50. Id. at 2464.
51. Id.
52. Id. at 2465
53. Id.
54. Id.
55. Id. (quoting Graham v. Florida, 130 S. Ct. 2011, 2026 (2010)). The Court noted that its decisions concerning juvenile sentencing rest not only on common sense but on science and social science as well. Id. at 2464-65 & n.5 (citing Brief for Am. Psychological Ass’n et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Petitioners at 3-4 Miller, 132 S. Ct. 2455 (Nos. 10-9646, 10-9647), 2012 WL 174239 at *3-4; Brief for J. Lawrence Aber et al. as Amici Curiae in Support of Petitioners at 12-28 Miller, 132 S.Ct. 2455 (Nos. 10-9646, 10-9647), 2012 WL 195300 at *12-28).
56. The Court’s jurisprudential approach of adopting a narrower rule that decided the cases
striking down mandatory life without parole sentences is clear: mandatory sentencing schemes prevent the sentencer from considering the offender’s status as a juvenile and all that entails. 57 Such sentencing with blinders on, the Court explained, contravenes the foundational principle of both Roper and Graham “that imposition of a State’s most severe penalties on juvenile offenders cannot proceed as though they were not children.” 58

Among the factors that must be considered at capital sentencing, the Court said, are the “mitigating qualities of youth.” 59 The Court relied, in particular, on its decision thirty years earlier in Eddings v. Oklahoma. 60 In Eddings, a sixteen-year old shot and killed a police officer and was sentenced to death. The Court overturned his death sentence, reasoning that the sentencing judge did not consider his “neglectful and violent family background (including his mother’s alcoholism and his father’s physical abuse) and his emotional disturbance.” 61 The Court noted that Eddings found such evidence more relevant for sentencing a youthful defendant than an adult because “just as the chronological age of a minor is itself a relevant mitigating factor of great weight, so must the background and mental and emotional development of a youthful defendant be duly considered” in assessing his culpability. 62

The Court was troubled that, absent consideration of the mitigating features of adolescence, every juvenile convicted of homicide, regardless of age or level of participation in the crime, would receive the same sentence as “the vast majority of adults committing similar homicide

See infra text accompanying notes 207-217.


58. Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2466.

59. Id. at 2467 (quoting Johnson v. Texas, 509 U.S. 350, 367 (1993)).

60. Id. (citing Eddings v. Oklahoma, 455 U.S. 104 (1982)).

61. Id. (quoting Eddings, 455 U.S. at 115).

62. Id. (quoting Eddings, 455 U.S. at 116).
This is so because even though adults are subject to the death penalty in many jurisdictions, "very few offenders actually receive that sentence."\(^6\)\(^6\)\(^4\) Thus, mandatory life without parole subjects juvenile homicide offenders to "the same nominal punishment as almost all adults, even though the two classes differ significantly in moral culpability and capacity for change."\(^6\)\(^5\) Even then, the penalty imposed on an adolescent is "the same... in name only"\(^6\)\(^6\) as the penalty imposed on an adult because an adolescent will serve "more years and a greater percentage of his life in prison than an adult offender."\(^6\)\(^7\) Having recognized the demonstrable lack of proportionality inherent in those mandatory sentences, the Court held that "the Eighth Amendment forbids a sentencing scheme that mandates life in prison without possibility of parole for juvenile offenders."\(^6\)\(^8\)

With that holding, the Court finished defining the law.\(^6\)\(^9\) Because striking down mandatory life without parole was "sufficient to decide [the] cases,"\(^7\)\(^0\) the Court did not consider Miller and Jackson's broader argument for a categorical ban on juvenile life without parole, either for all juveniles or for those fourteen and under.\(^7\)\(^1\) Thus, it remains possible for a juvenile to receive a sentence of life without parole after the sentencer has heard the juvenile homicide offender's complete mitigation story. The Court did not rule out that possibility; indeed, it appeared to anticipate some such sentences: "[W]e think appropriate occasions for sentencing juveniles to this harshest possible penalty will be uncommon."\(^7\)\(^2\)

Having announced its ruling, the Court quickly dispatched the arguments of the States of Alabama and Arkansas.\(^7\)\(^3\) First, the Court distinguished cases involving juveniles sentenced to life without parole...
from other non-death penalty cases, which are governed by the "gross disproportionality" rule of *Harmelin.*\(^7\) The Court stated that *Harmelin* "had nothing to do with children and did not purport to apply its holding to the sentencing of juvenile offenders."\(^7\) While *Harmelin* recognized that "death is different,"\(^7\) *Miller* recognized that "children are different too,"\(^7\) and that difference had led the Court "on multiple occasions" to hold that "a sentencing rule permissible for adults may not be so for children."\(^7\) Therefore, those cases, and not *Harmelin,* governed Miller's and Jackson's sentences.\(^7\)

Again the Court held fast to its insistence that youth matters for purposes of sentencing when it rejected the States' argument that the Court could not hold the sentences here unconstitutional because no national consensus against them existed.\(^8\) The Court found that argument weaker than in *Graham* because, unlike *Graham* and *Roper,* the *Miller* decision did not categorically ban a penalty but only mandated a certain sentencing process.\(^8\) Moreover, the number of states permitting life without parole for the juvenile nonhomicide offenders addressed by *Graham* was greater by ten than the number imposing mandatory life without parole on juveniles convicted of

\[^7\text{Id. at 2470 (citing Harmelin v. Michigan, 501 U.S. 957 (1991)).}\]
\[^7\text{Id.}\]
\[^6\text{Id.}\]
\[^7\text{Id. ("Indeed, it is the odd legal rule that does not have some form of exception for children.").}\]
\[^7\text{Id.}\]
\[^7\text{Id. at 2471.}\]
\[^8\text{Id.}\]
\[^8\text{Id. The Court did not address the question whether *Miller* will apply retroactively, but its characterization of its decision as mandating a certain sentencing process, not banning a particular penalty, could be significant. Following the rule laid out in *Teague v. Lane,* 489 U.S. 288 (1989), if the Supreme Court announces a new rule, that rule will not be applied retroactively unless it falls within one of two exceptions. *Id.* at 307. Only the first exception is relevant here. That exception includes "rules prohibiting a certain category of punishment for a class of defendants because of their status or offense." *Penry v. Lynaugh,* 492 U.S. 302, 330 (1989), *overruled on other grounds by Atkins v. Virginia,* 536 U.S. 304 (2002). Thus, if *Miller*’s ruling that life without parole cannot be imposed on juveniles mandatorily is interpreted as a prohibition of a "certain category of punishment," *Miller* will be applied retroactively. If that ruling is seen as merely a procedural change in how life without parole is imposed on minors, it will not apply retroactively. See Laurie Levenson, *Retroactivity of Cases on Criminal Defendants’ Rights,* NAT’L L.J. 26 (Aug. 13, 2012) (suggesting that if the retroactivity record of *Graham* v. Florida is a guide, the courts will not unanimously embrace retroactivity for *Miller*). See also Erwin Chemerinsky, *Juvenile Life-Without-Parole Case Means Courts Must Look at Mandatory Sentences,* A.B.A. JOURNAL (Aug. 8, 2012 8:30 AM CDT), http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/chemerinsky_juvenile_life-without-parole_case_means_courts_must_look_at_sen/ (predicting that the Supreme Court will have to resolve the retroactivity question and opining that *Miller* made a substantive change in the law and therefore should be applied retroactively).\]
murder, as in *Miller.*82 Considering the facts, the Court concluded that it was "breaking no new ground in these cases."83

Finally, the Court explained why the presence of discretion in some jurisdictions' provisions for transfer of a juvenile to adult court has "limited utility" for the later sentencing determination.84 At such an early pretrial stage, judges typically have limited information about either the offender or the offense.85 In addition, the choices available at the transfer stage are stark: remain in juvenile court and be released in a matter of months or years or go to adult criminal court and face being sentenced to life without parole, as in the cases before the Court.86 In adult court, the possible sentences do not represent such extremes: rather than life without parole, one could be sentenced to life with parole or a long term of years.87 Because of those differences, the Court concluded: "the discretion available to a judge at the transfer stage cannot substitute for discretion at post-trial sentencing in adult court — and so cannot satisfy the Eighth Amendment."88

In the end, it was *Graham, Roper,* and the Court's individualized sentencing decisions that carried the day for Evan Miller and Kuntrell Jackson.89 Going forward, the Court said, "a judge or jury must have the opportunity to consider mitigating circumstances before imposing the harshest possible penalty for juveniles."90 Because the mandatory

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82. *Miller,* 132 S. Ct. at 2471 (stating that thirty-nine jurisdictions permitted the sentence prohibited by *Graham,* whereas twenty-nine jurisdictions imposed mandatory life without parole sentences on juvenile murderers).

83. *Id.* at 2472.

84. *Id.* at 2474 (observing that in about half of the relevant jurisdictions, some juvenile homicide offenders are transferred to adult court automatically, without any discretionary review by the juvenile court, and in several states the decision is a matter of pure prosecutorial discretion with no opportunity for judicial review).

85. *Id.* See Arya, *supra* note 65, at 130-31 (arguing that, even with the best information, judges and experts have difficulty assessing the culpability and maturity of youth).

86. 132 S. Ct. at 2474-75.

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.* at 2475.

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.* By referring to "imposing the harshest possible penalty for juveniles," the Court again anticipates that some juvenile offenders will receive a sentence of life without parole, even after the individualized sentencing required by the Court's ruling. *Id.* Juvenile homicide offenders will face a high hurdle because no right to counsel exists for those new sentencing hearings, as they would occur in a state post-conviction setting. *See* Martinez v. Ryan, 132 S. Ct. 1309, 1326 (2012) (confirming absence of constitutional right to counsel in state post-conviction proceedings); Coleman v. Thompson, 501 U.S. 722, 752 (1991) (same). The perils of proceeding without counsel have aroused a call for a "moral right to counsel" in these cases. *See* Editorial, *A Moral Right to Counsel,* N.Y. TIMES, July 3, 2012, at A22 ("And not just any lawyer . . . The hearings will require lawyers with training in psychology and human development to argue convincingly that an offender's record supports reducing a life sentence—including what Justice Elena Kagan, in her
sentencing schemes in Alabama and Arkansas had condemned Miller and Jackson to die in prison, they violated the principle of proportionality and the ban on cruel and unusual punishment contained in the Eighth Amendment. 91

With its ruling, the Court reaffirmed what Roper and Graham have told us: First, kids are different from adults in ways that diminish their culpability for the crimes of their youth. Second, those differences apply to everyone below the age of eighteen. Third, nothing in Roper and Graham suggests that the distinctive traits and vulnerabilities of juveniles are more or less salient depending on the seriousness of the crime. Instead, what is true about our youth applies with equal force to the worst of crimes, like the homicides of which Evan Miller and Kuntrell Jackson were convicted. 92 Having embraced all of those principles, the Court’s detour around a categorical rule against all life

91. Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2455, 2475. Justice Kagan delivered the opinion of the Court, with Justices Kennedy, Ginsburg, Breyer, and Sotomayor joining. Justice Breyer also filed a concurring opinion, in which Justice Sotomayor joined. He wrote to add the point that, if the State continues to seek a sentence of life without parole for Kuntrell Jackson, a determination whether he “kill[ed] or intend[ed] to kill” the robbery victim will have to be made, based on Graham’s “clear rule: The only juveniles who may constitutionally be sentenced to life without parole are those convicted of homicide offenses who ‘kill or intend to kill.’” Id. at 2476 (Breyer, J., concurring) (citing Graham v. Florida, 130 S. Ct. 2011, 2027 (2010)). Three dissenting opinions were filed. In the first, Chief Justice Roberts, joined by Justices Scalia, Thomas, and Alito, concluded that “[n]either the text of the Constitution nor our precedent prohibits legislatures from requiring that juvenile murderers be sentenced to life without parole.” Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2482 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting). Justice Thomas, joined by Justice Scalia, expressed his perennial disagreement with the notion of an Eighth Amendment proportionality principle, contending that there is no such thing. Id. at 2483 (Thomas, J., dissenting). Writing more broadly, Justice Thomas condemned the majority for relying on precedents that are inconsistent with or “have no basis in the original understanding of the Eighth Amendment.” Id. at 2484 (Thomas, J., dissenting). Finally, Justice Alito, joined by Justice Scalia, decried the majority’s willingness to countermand democratic decision-making and establish Eighth Amendment principles that “are no longer tied to objective indicia of society’s standards.” Id. at 2490 (Alito, J., dissenting).

92. See FRANKLIN E. ZIMRING, AMERICAN YOUTH VIOLENCE 84 (1998) (“Doctrines of diminished responsibility have their greatest impact when large injuries have been caused by actors not fully capable of understanding and self-control. . . . if the doctrine of diminished responsibility means anything in relation to the punishment of immature offenders, its impact cannot be limited to trivial cases. Diminished responsibility is either generally applicable or generally unpersuasive as a mitigating principle.”); Barry C. Feld, A Slower Form of Death: Implications of Roper v. Simmons for Juveniles Sentenced to Life Without Parole, 22 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB’L POL’Y 9, 43-44 (2008) (“Juveniles’ criminal responsibility is just as diminished when states sentence them to life without parole (LWOP) as it is when it executes them. Although the Court’s capital punishment jurisprudence insists that ‘death is different,’ there is no principled penal basis to distinguish between juveniles’ diminished responsibility that precludes the death penalty from their equally reduced culpability for other severe sentences”).
without parole sentences for juveniles is perplexing. Worse yet, it is unprincipled and unsound.

III. UNPRINCIPLED

Miller is unprincipled because it purports to embrace both Roper and Graham while rendering a decision that veers far from the principles of those cases. Miller’s departure from the precedents finds the foundation for its narrow ruling in the fact that Graham’s “flat ban on life without parole applied only to nonhomicide crimes.”93 But while Graham limited its holding to nonhomicide offenses,94 the Miller Court was not constrained by that ruling. Indeed, in both cases before the Court, the petitioners asked the Court to extend its categorical prohibition to life without parole for homicides committed by juveniles.95 Miller declined the invitation without considering the question.96

Miller also asserts that Graham “took care to distinguish those [nonhomicide] offenses from murder.”97 It is true that Graham distinguished the more serious crime of murder from nonhomicide offenses.98 However, it did so as a building block of its foundation for recognizing the “twice diminished moral culpability” of a juvenile offender who did not kill, as compared to an adult murderer.99 As the Court explained, “[t]he age of the offender and the nature of the crime each bear on the analysis.”100 Thus, even for juveniles who commit murder, their moral culpability compared to adults remains diminished by their age (though not by their crime), and they, therefore, are still less

93. Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2465.
94. Graham, 130 S. Ct. at 2030. Of course, the only crimes before the Court at that time were nonhomicide offenses. See id.
95. Miller Petition, supra note 9, at 9-25; Jackson Petition, supra note 9, at 8-25.
96. Miller, 132 S. Ct. at 2469 (“Because that holding [that the Eighth Amendment forbids mandatory life without parole sentences for juvenile offenders] is sufficient to decide these cases, we do not consider Jackson’s and Miller’s alternative argument that the Eighth Amendment requires a categorical bar on life without parole for juveniles, or at least for those 14 and younger”).
97. Id. at 2465.
98. Graham, 130 S. Ct. at 2027 (citing Kennedy v. Louisiana, 554 U.S. 407 (2008) and holding that death penalty for rape of a child violates Eighth Amendment); Tison v. Arizona, 481 U.S. 137 (1987) (holding that the death penalty for one whose participation in felony resulting in murder was major and whose mental state was reckless indifference did not violate Eighth Amendment); Enmund v. Florida, 458 U.S. 782 (1982) (holding that death penalty for one who does not kill or intends to kill violates Eighth Amendment); Coker v. Georgia, 433 U.S. 584 (1977) (holding that death penalty for rape of adult woman violated Eighth Amendment)).
100. Id.
deserving, as a categorical matter, of the most severe punishments.101

Graham did not answer the question of what “once diminished moral culpability” would mean for juvenile homicide offenders because that question was not before the Court.102 Perhaps it would mean exactly what Miller ruled: that mandatory life without parole sentences for juvenile homicide offenders violate the Eighth Amendment, and that those offenders must receive individualized consideration at their sentencing hearings.103 The problem for Miller is that nothing in the Court’s juvenile sentencing precedents suggested such a result. Indeed, both Roper and Graham rejected in no uncertain terms the case-by-case individualized sentencing process now mandated by Miller.104 As the following shows, Miller’s full-throated endorsement of a sentencing process roundly denounced by its predecessors is devoid of principle and lacks any moral grounding.

We begin with Roper. There, the Court considered and rejected the State of Missouri’s argument that the Court’s adoption of a categorical rule barring the death penalty for offenders under eighteen was “arbitrary and unnecessary” because of the Court’s insistence on individualized sentencing in capital cases.105 The Court recognized that “[a] central feature of death penalty sentencing is a particular assessment of the circumstances of the crime and the characteristics of the offender.”106 That system, the Court explained, “is designed to consider both aggravating and mitigating circumstances, including youth.”107 The Court found that system wanting, however, when applied to juvenile offenders because “[a]n unacceptable likelihood exists that the brutality or cold-blooded nature of any particular crime would overpower mitigating arguments based on youth as a matter of course.”108 That possibility existed, the Court said, “even where the juvenile offender’s objective immaturity, vulnerability, and lack of true depravity should require a sentence less severe than death.”109

101. See, e.g., The Supreme Court 2009 Term Leading Cases: Eighth Amendment—Juvenile Life Without Parole Sentences, 124 HARV. L. REV. 209, 217 (2010) (arguing that “the higher culpability of murder has never before trumped considerations of the lessened culpability of a class of murderers” and that the Court should exercise its independent judgment to abolish all life without parole sentences).
103. Id. at 2460.
104. See infra text accompanying notes 105-149.
106. Id. at 572.
107. Id.
108. Id. at 573.
109. Id.
Roper recognized what developmental psychologists and the Court itself have long known: that juveniles are categorically different from adults and are, therefore, less culpable for the crimes they commit. Because juveniles are more susceptible than adults to immature and irresponsible behavior, "their irresponsible conduct is not as morally reprehensible as that of an adult." Moreover, the vulnerability and lack of control that are a hallmark of youth "mean juveniles have a greater claim than adults to be forgiven for failing to escape negative influences in their whole environments." Because juveniles are at a stage of life where they are still struggling to define their unique identities, "it is less supportable to conclude that even a heinous crime committed by a juvenile is evidence of irretrievably depraved character." Finally, "from a moral standpoint, it would be misguided to equate the failings of a minor with those of an adult, for a greater possibility exists that a minor’s character deficiencies will be reformed." The differences between juvenile and adult offenders, the Court concluded, are "too marked and well understood to risk allowing a youthful person to receive the death penalty despite insufficient culpability." Only a rule placing all juveniles off limits, the Court concluded, would protect them from the possibility of a death penalty.

110. Roper, 543 U.S. at 569-70 (citing Thompson v. Oklahoma, 487 U.S. 815, 835 (1988) (the reasons why juveniles are not trusted with the privileges and responsibilities of an adult also explains why "their irresponsible conduct is not as morally reprehensible as that of an adult"); Eddings v. Oklahoma, 455 U.S. 104, 115-16 (1982) ("Youth is more than a chronological fact. It is a time and condition of life when a person may be most susceptible to influence and to psychological damage. . . . Even the normal 16-year old customarily lacks the maturity of an adult").

111. Id. at 569-70 (citing Stanford, 492 U.S. at 395 (Brennan, J., dissenting)).

112. Id.

113. Id. at 570 (citing Stanford, 492 U.S. at 395 (Brennan, J., dissenting)).

114. Id.

115. Id.

116. Id.

117. Id. at 572-73.

118. Id. at 570-71 ("In Thompson, a plurality of the Court recognized the import of these characteristics [differences between juveniles and adults] with respect to juveniles under 16, and relied on them to hold that the Eighth Amendment prohibited the imposition of the death penalty on juveniles below that age. We conclude that the same reasoning applies to all juvenile offenders under 18") (internal citation omitted).
sentence despite their diminished culpability. The answer was to adopt a categorical ban on the juvenile death penalty, and so the Court did just that.

Five years later, the Court was asked to apply Roper to the case of a seventeen-year-old who had been sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for an armed burglary he had taken part in with three other teenagers in Jacksonville, Florida. Following the lead of Christopher Simmons, whose appeal had brought about the abolition of the juvenile death penalty, Terrance Graham challenged the entire sentencing practice of condemning juvenile nonhomicide offenders to life in prison. That challenge propelled the Court into new territory, for it never before had considered a categorical challenge to a "term-of-years sentence." The novelty of the claim did not deter the Graham Court. The approach in the noncapital sentencing precedents, while "suited for considering a gross proportionality challenge to a particular defendant's sentence," was inappropriate for Graham because he had thrown an entire sentencing practice into question. The Court signaled the difference between Graham's case and all of its earlier term-of-years challenges when it stated that "[t]his case implicates a particular type of sentence as it applies to an entire class of offenders." Although the Court had always before limited its categorical rulings to death penalty cases, with Graham it was those

119. Id. at 571.
120. Id. at 574. There is more than a hint of irony in the fact the sentences of the juvenile offenders on death row would be converted to life without parole. See Feld, supra note 92, at 21-22; Elizabeth Cepparulo, Roper v. Simmons: Unveiling Juvenile Purgatory: Is Life Really Better Than Death?, 16 TEMP. POL. & CIV. RTS. L. REV. 225 (2006) ("In many states, life without parole and death are the only two options when sentencing homicide offenders"). See, e.g., Duncan v. State, 922 So. 2d 245, 252 (Ala. Crim. App. 2005) (remanding, based on Roper, to set aside Duncan’s sentence of death and to resentence him to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole—the only other sentence available for a defendant convicted of capital murder); Lecroy v. State, 954 So. 2d 747, 748 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2007) (affirming trial court’s decision to conform Lecroy’s sentence to the state supreme court’s specifications—life without the possibility of parole for twenty-five years).
122. See Roper, 543 U.S. at 578-79.
124. Id. at 2022.
125. Id.
126. Id.
127. Id. at 2022-23.
cases, and not the Court’s noncapital proportionality precedents, that governed the resolution of Graham’s appeal.\textsuperscript{129}

To reach its categorical ruling, the Court in Graham considered and systematically rejected other alternatives. The State of Florida argued that its laws and the laws of other states “take sufficient account of the age of a juvenile offender.”\textsuperscript{130} The Court acknowledged the relevance of an offender’s age to the Eighth Amendment analysis, but was concerned that “[n]othing in Florida’s laws prevents its courts from sentencing a juvenile nonhomicide offender to life without parole based on a subjective judgment that the defendant’s crimes demonstrate an ‘irretrievably depraved character.’”\textsuperscript{131} That, the Court said, “is inconsistent with the Eighth Amendment.”\textsuperscript{132}

The Court next considered an approach holding that the Eighth Amendment requires sentencers to “take the offender’s age into consideration as part of a case-specific gross disproportionality inquiry, weighing it against the seriousness of the crime.”\textsuperscript{133} Such an approach to sentencing must, the Court said, “be confined by some boundaries. The dilemma of juvenile sentencing demonstrates this.”\textsuperscript{134} The problem with a case-by-case proportionality analysis, the Court reasoned, is that courts cannot “with sufficient accuracy distinguish the few incorrigible juvenile offenders from the many that have the capacity for change.”\textsuperscript{135}
Given that the differences between juveniles and adults are so "'marked and well understood,'" a case-by-case approach presented too great a risk that a juvenile would receive a sentence of life without parole "'despite insufficient culpability.'"

Moreover, *Graham* reasoned, case-specific sentencing does not take account of the "'special difficulties encountered by counsel in juvenile representation.'" The Court relied on *amici* for its recognition that "'[j]uveniles mistrust adults'" and are "'less likely than adults to work effectively with their lawyers to aid in their defense.'" The problems juveniles face in their lawyer-client relationships stem from "'[d]ifficulty in weighing long-term consequences; a corresponding impulsiveness; and reluctance to trust defense counsel seen as part of the adult world a rebellious youth rejects.'" All of those difficulties likely "'impair the quality of a juvenile defendant's representation.'" A categorical rule, the Court concluded, avoids the risk that those same difficulties will cause "'a court or jury [to] erroneously conclude that a particular juvenile is sufficiently culpable to deserve life without parole for a nonhomicide.'"

Finally, with a categorical rule, all juvenile nonhomicide offenders will have "'a chance to demonstrate maturity and reform.'" The same concerns as in *Roper* applied to sentences of life without parole: "'Life in prison without the possibility of parole gives no chance for fulfillment outside prison walls, no chance for reconciliation with society, no hope. Maturity can lead to that considered reflection which is the foundation for remorse, renewal, and rehabilitation.'" A young person who knows he has no chance of leaving prison often is twice denied an opportunity

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136. *Graham*, 130 S.Ct. at 2032 (quoting *Roper*, 543 U.S. at 572-73). Studies since *Graham* have confirmed the differences between juveniles and adults that were significant to the Court in both *Roper* and *Graham*. See Brief for J. Lawrence Aber et al. for Petitioners, supra note 55 (presenting the work and views of psychologists, social scientists, and neuroscientists).


138. *Id.*


140. *Graham*, 130 S. Ct. at 2032.

141. *Id.*

142. *Id.* (citing Atkins v. Virginia, 536 U.S. 304, 320 (2002) ("Mentally retarded defendants may be less able to give meaningful assistance to their counsel").

143. *Id.*

144. *Id.*

145. *Id.* See, e.g., *Smith & Cohen*, supra note 38, at 92 ("Graham's most significant role may be its recognition of redemption as an Eighth Amendment constitutional principle, rejecting a legislative determination that entire classes of individuals were irredeemable.").
to change. First, the very term of his imprisonment leaves him “little incentive to become a responsible individual.”146 Second, the system itself often “becomes complicit in the lack of development” by denying counseling, education, and rehabilitation programs to those who will never leave prison.147 To avoid “the perverse consequence in which the lack of maturity that led to an offender’s crime is reinforced by the prison term,”148 a categorical rule against life without parole for nonhomicide offenders was necessary.149

The rationale that had led the Court in both Roper and Graham to adopt categorical rules and to reject case-by-case sentencing of juveniles was plainly before the Miller Court. Yet instead of adopting it or explaining why it did not hold in the cases before it, the Court in Miller took a decided detour, adopting its reasoning about adolescent differences from adults but not the necessary results of that reasoning, as counseled in both Roper and Graham. The harm that the unprincipled decision in Miller’s has (and will) wrought is not hypothetical. As Roper and Graham could have foretold, those who seek resentencing under Miller will face a head-on collision with everything those cases warned against. What that collision is likely to look like is the subject of the next section.

IV. UNSOUND

In addition to being unprincipled, the Court’s endorsement in Miller’s of case-by-case individualized sentencing for juvenile homicide offenders is unsound.150 We need look no further than the facts of Roper, Graham, and Miller to understand just how unsound the ruling is. Roper was the first Supreme Court opinion to recognize the dangers of individualized sentencing for juveniles. Christopher Simmons, the juvenile petitioner in Roper, had no juvenile charges or adjudications and no prior adult criminal convictions at the time he was tried for the

146. Graham, 130 S. Ct. at 2032.
147. Id. at 2032-33.
148. Id. at 2033.
149. Id.
150. Even the reliance of the Court in Miller on Eddings v. Oklahoma, see supra text accompanying notes 57-62, was a fool’s errand. Upon remand by the Supreme Court for consideration of all the mitigating factors in young Eddings’s life, he was resentenced to death. Eddings v. Oklahoma, 688 P.2d 342 (Okla. Ct. Crim. App. 1984). Ultimately, the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, citing statutory limitations on such remands, modified Eddings’ death sentence and remanded to the county district court to sentence him to life without parole, the only option under the controlling state law. Id. at 343.
murder that condemned him to death row. At his sentencing, Simmons’s parents, his two young half-brothers, and two friends described their loving relationships with him and various acts of kindness he had performed. In closing argument, Simmons’s counsel asserted that Simmons’s kind acts, his lack of any prior criminal history, and his age at the time of the crime were mitigating factors that counseled against the death penalty. Against that placid backdrop, the facts surrounding Christopher Simmons’s crime were chilling. Before he committed murder, Simmons told his friends that he wanted to kill someone. He outlined in detail what would become the actual crime: he would “commit burglary and murder, by breaking and entering, tying up a victim, and throwing the victim off a bridge.” Simmons, then seventeen, and his fifteen-year old accomplice did exactly that. After entering the victim’s home through an open window, they duct-taped her eyes, mouth, and hands, put her in her minivan, took her to a railroad trestle spanning the Meramec River, tied her feet and hands together with electrical wire, wrapped her entire face with duct tape, and threw her off the bridge, where they left her to drown. By anyone’s standards, this was a truly monstrous crime.

The fact that juveniles committed the murder could well draw a gut reaction of horror that anyone so young could do something so awful. But the Constitution does not permit subjective gut reactions to define the sentencing of our young. In explaining why the Eighth Amendment required a categorical rule disallowing the death penalty for juveniles, Roper recognized that “[i]n some cases a defendant’s youth may even be counted against him.” In fact, the prosecutor at Christopher Simmons’s trial had argued in rebuttal that his youth was aggravating rather than mitigating: “Age, he says. Think about age. Seventeen years old. Isn’t that scary? Doesn’t that scare you? Mitigating? Quite the contrary, I submit. Quite the contrary.” It is precisely because of

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152. Id.
153. Id.
154. Roper, 543 U.S. at 556.
155. Id.
156. Id. at 556-57
157. Id.
158. Id. at 573.
159. Id. Simmons is not the only case in which prosecutors have portrayed youth as aggravating. See Ashley Dobbs, The Use of Youth as an Aggravating Factor in Death Penalty Cases Involving Minors, 10 JUV. JUST. UPDATE 1, 14-15 (June/July 2004) (collecting examples).
160. Roper, 543 U.S. at 558.
the possibility of that kind of visceral appeal that rules requiring consideration of the mitigating effect of youth at sentencing were insufficient to address the *Roper* Court’s “larger concerns” and required a categorical ban on the juvenile death penalty.\footnote{161}{Id. at 573.}

Central to those concerns was the undeniable truth that even expert psychologists have great difficulty differentiating between “the juvenile whose crime reflects unfortunate yet transient immaturity, and the rare juvenile offender whose crime reflects irreparable corruption.”\footnote{162}{Id. (citing Laurence B. Steinberg & Elizabeth S. Scott, *Less Guilty by Reason of Adolescence: Developmental Immaturity, Diminished Responsibility, and the Juvenile Death Penalty*, 58 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 1009, 1014-16 (2003)).}} \footnote{163}{Id. (citing *AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS* 701-06 (4th ed. text rev. 2000)).} It is that difficulty, the Court went on to say, that has led to the “rule forbidding psychiatrists from diagnosing any patient under eighteen as having antisocial personality disorder, a disorder also referred to as psychopathy or sociopathy, and which is characterized by callousness, cynicism, and contempt for the feelings, rights, and suffering of others.”\footnote{164}{Id.} The Court concluded that if trained experts feel constrained to refrain from labeling our youth with such a diagnosis, “States should refrain from asking jurors to issue a far graver condemnation—that a juvenile offender merits the death penalty.”\footnote{165}{Graham v. Florida, 130 S. Ct. 2011, 2031 (2010). The Court also recited what the sentencing judge had said when he sentenced thirteen-year old Joe Sullivan to life without parole. *See id.* (citing Brief of Respondent at 6 Sullivan v. Florida, 129 S. Ct. 2157 (2009) (No. 08-7621), 2009 WL 2954164 at *6 (stating that Sullivan had been given “opportunity after opportunity to upright himself,” but had demonstrated that he was “unwilling to follow the law and needed to be kept away from society for the duration of his life”). *Sullivan v. Florida* was argued the same day as *Graham*, but the Court later dismissed the writ of certiorari as improvidently granted. *Graham*, 130 S. Ct. at 2031. Nonetheless, the facts were significant to the Court. *See id.*}} \footnote{166}{Id.} \footnote{167}{Id. (quoting *Graham v. State*, 982 So. 2d 43, 45 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. April 10, 2008)).}
birth” and was plagued by “long-term depression,” while both of his parents were addicted to crack cocaine. In elementary school, “Graham was diagnosed as suffering from ADHD, but his mother told him not to take the prescribed medication” (Ritalin). “Graham wanted to move out of his home as soon as possible so as not to be around his father, who was unemployed” and still smoking crack cocaine. Aside from the drug addiction, Graham’s father and his siblings had a history of problems with the law, including time in prison and juvenile detention facilities. Without the guiding hand of a beneficent court or a law that recognized all of the complexities involved in sentencing youth, Terrance Graham stood very little chance at becoming a productive and responsible citizen.

The judge’s subjective judgment that Terrance Graham was “irredeemably depraved” strikes at the heart of what the Eighth Amendment prohibits in the sentencing of juveniles. What the Court in Roper and Graham understood was that even all the advances in our understanding of youth from the social sciences and neuroscience could not prevent the power of a horrible murder from overwhelming the sentencing determination. The knowledge from MRI studies about brain development and the work of our best developmental psychologists about the stark differences between juveniles and adults, even when coupled with a mitigation story that would make one weep, would not, the Court knew, outweigh the often horrific facts of a terrible crime committed by juveniles. It was for these reasons that the Court in Roper and Graham wrested that decision from the sentencers and declared that certain sentences are cruel and unusual when imposed on juveniles as a categorical matter. Now Miller, with its mandate of individualized consideration at sentencing, reopens the door to all of the malignity of subjective decision-making and its fruits.

Just how wrong a sentencing process can go is evident in the stories that Evan Miller’s and Kuntrell Jackson’s resentencing hearings are
likely to tell. Miller’s mitigation story is compelling. From an early age, he was the target of severe beatings by his father and made his first of six suicide attempts at the tender age of five, when he tried to hang himself. Both of his parents were alcoholics, and Miller’s mother also was addicted to illegal drugs. By the time he was eight years old, Miller had begun drinking and using drugs. From that age forward, he received mental health treatment intermittently at a number of treatment centers. At age ten, the state removed Miller and his siblings from their family home and placed them in foster care. Following his parents’ divorce a few years later, the state returned Miller to the care of his drug-addicted mother, and Miller followed in her footsteps, becoming deeply drug addicted himself.

This was the setting into which their 52-year-old neighbor inserted himself when he came to Miller’s home late at night to do a drug deal with Miller’s mother. Miller, then fourteen, and his sixteen-year old friend went with the neighbor back to his house for a night of drinking and drugs. Considering all of the factors affecting adolescent decision-making and behavior as outlined in *Roper* and *Graham*, particularly when in the company of an older peer, what Miller would do that night can best be understood as the drug-addled, impulse-driven, peer-approval-seeking actions of a terribly misguided youth.

In its opposition to Miller’s petition for a writ of certiorari, the State of Alabama focused on a distinctly different set of facts than Miller’s mitigation story—the details of the crime of which Miller was convicted. The State characterized the killing of Miller’s neighbor as “among the most gruesome and intolerable crimes a human being can commit.” The State described in detail Miller’s hitting of the man with his fists and a baseball bat, and his continuing to beat him with the...
bat “‘everywhere’” as the man was screaming. When he stopped hitting him with the bat, the State recites Miller’s friend’s testimony that Miller then put a sheet over the man’s head and said, “I am God, I’ve come to take your life,” before hitting him with the bat once more and then going home. Miller and his friend soon returned and set two couches on fire, in words his friend attributed to Miller, “‘to cover up the evidence.”’ A full autopsy revealed that the man died of smoke inhalation, with multiple blunt force injuries as a contributing factor making it more difficult for him to breathe in the fire. The State concluded by arguing, based on those facts, that this murder, while rare for a fourteen-year old, made appropriate the imposition of a life without parole sentence on someone so young.

Kuntrell Jackson, like Evan Miller, was fourteen on the evening in November 1999 when he and two other boys decided to rob a video store in Blytheville, Arkansas. The boys never discussed bringing a weapon with them, but on the way to the store, Jackson learned that one of the boys had a sawed-off shotgun hidden in his coat sleeve. When they arrived at the store, Jackson remained outside while the other two went in. The gunman pointed his weapon at the store clerk and demanded money from the cash register; the clerk told him she did not have any money. Shortly after that, Jackson entered the store and yelled out “‘we ain’t playin’” or “‘I thought you all was playin’” just in time to see his friend shoot the store clerk in the face after she refused to hand over the money and threatened to call the police.

It is hardly surprising that Jackson ended up at a robbery gone bad that night. He was raised in public housing projects in an impoverished community known for its drugs and violence. His father abandoned the family before Jackson was born. His mother went to prison for

188. Id. at 3.
189. Id.
190. Id.
191. Id. at 6.
192. Id. at 19.
194. Jackson, 194 S.W.3d at 758.
195. Id.
196. Id. at 758-59.
197. Id. at 759-60.
198. Jackson Petition, supra note 9, at 4.
199. Id.
shooting and injuring a neighbor when Jackson was six, and seven years later, his older brother was also imprisoned for shooting someone. Two of his sisters became pregnant in their teens, and several other relatives were incarcerated. The presiding judge at Jackson’s preliminary hearing described Jackson’s mental capacity as “‘borderline or near borderline,’” placing his mental functioning “at the fourth percentile compared to children his age.” Even the criminal justice system seemed to have conspired against him, for despite him not being the trigger-man, the jury convicted Jackson of capital felony murder, and the judge sentenced him to a mandatory term of life without parole.

In the eyes of jurors, the telling of Miller’s and Jackson’s stories, replete with mitigating factors, likely will pale in comparison to the cold-blooded nature of the crimes they committed. One can well imagine the members of the jury recoiling with disgust from the facts of the crimes. No measure of mitigation or understanding of adolescent development is likely to overcome the raw, visceral repulsion that is the natural response to what Miller and his friend did or to what Jackson and his friends did. Thus, far from removing subjectivity from the sentencing process, Miller injects it into the very heart of sentencing. It was just that kind of subjectivity that Roper and Graham sought to exclude from sentencing determinations for juveniles by establishing categorical prohibitions against certain penalties. By paying lip service to the principles that drove the decisions in Roper and Graham, Miller does a disservice to all juvenile homicide offenders who received

200. Id. at 5.
201. Id.
202. Id.
203. Id. at 4
204. Id. at 6.
205. Even though he was not the trigger-man, Jackson’s spontaneous shouting out of words that could be interpreted as “we ain’t playin’” could also lead to the conclusion that it was those words that compelled the shooter to shoot. Jackson v. State, 194 S.W.3d 757, 760 (Ark. 2004).
206. The stories of the juvenile offenders who were sentenced to death before Roper are to similar effect. Each case received the individualized sentencing required by Woodson and Lockett since the 1970s, and yet all were sentenced to death for crimes they committed before they were eighteen. See, e.g., Hain v. Gibson, 287 F.3d 1224, 1227 (10th Cir. 2002) (affirming death sentence despite mitigating factors including defendant’s youth, his young emotional and mental age, his lack of blameworthiness, his domination by an older co-defendant, his history of drug usage, a “‘[f]ear reaction to finding himself in a fugitive/captive situation,’” his lack of personal participation in the criminal acts compared to his co-defendant, his attempts to physically absent himself from the scene of the crime, and his family history, where the state alleged three aggravating factors: knowingly creating a risk of death to more than one person, the especially heinous and cruel nature of the murders, and the probability that Hain would be a continuing threat to society).
mandatory sentences of life without parole. While *Miller* provides them the opportunity to seek a lesser sentence, it does nothing to ensure that the new sentencing determination is the product of sound and principled decision-making. It is an essentially hollow promise devoid of any moral meaning. One is left to wonder why the *Miller* Court ruled as it did.

V. MISGUIDED CAUTION

Perhaps the decision to take the narrower path of overruling only the mandatory imposition of life without parole on juveniles and not the sentence itself was the Court's exercise of its minimalist inclinations.207 It was those inclinations that had fueled Justice O'Connor's dissent in *Roper*208 and Chief Justice Roberts's concurrence in *Graham*,209 but somehow eluded Justice Kennedy and those who joined his majority opinions in both cases.210 In the main, however, the Court has embraced...

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208. *See Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551, 602-03 (2005) (O'Connor, J., dissenting) (arguing that proportionality concerns raised in the case "may properly be addressed not by means of an arbitrary, categorical age-based rule, but rather through individualized sentencing in which juries are required to give appropriate mitigating weight to the defendant's immaturity, his susceptibility to outside pressures, his cognizance of the consequences of his actions, and so forth.").

209. *See Graham v. Florida*, 130 S. Ct. 2011, 2036 (2010) (Roberts, C.J., concurring) (agreeing that Graham's sentence violated the Eighth Amendment, but advocating reliance on existing precedents allowing for consideration of the particular defendant and particular crime at issue, rather than creating a new constitutional rule, as the majority had done).

210. *See Id. at* 2034 (majority opinion) ("The Constitution prohibits the imposition of a life without parole sentence on a juvenile offender who did not commit homicide."); *Roper*, 543 U.S. at 578 ("The Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments forbid imposition of the death penalty on offenders who were under the age of 18 when their crimes were committed."). Of course, the minimalist preference of the Roberts Court has not carried the day in every case. The Court has had its perfectionist moments. Cass R. Sunstein, *Minimal Appeal: Minimalism v. Fundamentalism*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Aug. 1, 2005, at 17, available at http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/minimal-appeal (explaining that perfectionist judges want to interpret the Constitution to promote individual rights). Without that more expansive approach, we would not have *Roper* or *Graham*, or the newfound judicial attention to juveniles' distinctive characteristics. *See David S. Tanenhaus, The Roberts Court's Liberal Turn on Juvenile Justice*, N.Y. TIMES, June 27, 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/27/opinion/the-roberts-courts-liberal-turn-on-juvenile-justice.html (tracing history of juvenile justice and expressing a pleasant surprise in the Roberts Court's resuscitation of the juvenile court ideal of individualized justice for children).
judicial minimalism over the past two decades, generating decisions that answer the narrowest question before the Court, and nothing more. 211

On the Roberts Court, all but the Court's two most conservative jurists have embraced judicial minimalism in one form or another. 212 However, that does not mean that the seven remaining Justices embrace the same views. "[T]he minimalist camp is large and diverse. The point is that they greatly prefer nudges to earthquakes." 213 Rather than adopting theories, minimalists decide cases. 214 With judicial minimalism the Justices "hope to do no more than is necessary to resolve cases." 215 "[M]inimalists tend to favor decisions that are [both] narrow, in the sense that they do not want to resolve issues not before the Court... [and] shallow, in the sense that they avoid the largest theoretical controversies." 216 Chief Justice Roberts's own words may

211. See, e.g., Christopher J. Peters, Assessing the New Judicial Minimalism, 100 COLUM. L. REV. 1454 (2000) (explaining that a resurgence in judicial minimalism has been endorsed by former and current judges and has sparked scholarly debate); Jay D. Wexler, Defending the Middle Way: Intermediate Scrutiny as Judicial Minimalism, 66 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 298 (1998) (explaining the virtues of judicial minimalism).


214. SUNSTEIN, ONE CASE AT A TIME, supra note 56, at 9.


best sum up his Court’s minimalism: “If it is not necessary to decide more to dispose of a case, in my view it is necessary not to decide more.”

Justice Kagan’s majority opinion in Miller was not as narrow as it might have been. The Court could have decided, on the facts of the cases before it, informed by a “common sense” understanding of the limitations and pitfalls of adolescence, that Evan Miller and Kuntrell Jackson did not deserve to die in prison, and reserved for another day any broader ruling. That would have been the narrowest of minimalist decisions as described above. But the Court’s decision to limit its ruling to the mandatory nature of the sentencing, while leaving intact the sentence itself, also was a minimalist ruling. By steering clear of an outright prohibition on life without parole for juveniles convicted of homicide, the Court avoided larger questions of juvenile culpability and penal proportionality. Those questions are left to play out in the courtrooms of twenty-eight states and the federal government, as those under mandatory life without parole sentences exercise their Miller right to an individualized determination of the appropriate sentence for each and every one of them. The enormous costs of all the decisions in the twenty-nine jurisdictions where mandatory life without parole was imposed on those under eighteen will be a direct consequence of the Court’s failure to adopt a broader ruling like those in Roper and Graham. Minimalism has its costs, and they are calculable.

It is in courtrooms across the country that the harsh mischief of minimalism will run its course, with outcomes uncertain and a life outside prison walls a mere hope. Predictability is an important value in our criminal law, and nowhere is predictability more important than in sentencing. But “minimalist rulings make predictability impossible to
achieve.” Indeed, when predictability is an important value, the
narrowness of minimalism “can be a big mistake” and “in some
domains, minimalism is a terrible blunder.” With its minimalist
ruling, the Miller Court has made either a big mistake or a terrible
blunder. Unfortunately, the lives of the two thousand prisoners
serving mandatory life without parole sentences for murders committed
when they were not yet old enough to vote depended on Miller to be
neither a big mistake nor a terrible blunder. The system failed them
once again.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Supreme Court had the opportunity in Miller to advance its
“kids are different” Eighth Amendment jurisprudence by declaring all
sentences of life without parole out of bounds for those convicted of
crimes committed when they were under eighteen years of age. Rather
than seize that opportunity, the Court squandered it, handing down a
perfunctory ruling that takes the small step of outlawing mandatory
sentences of life without parole for juvenile homicide offenders, while
shying away from a bold stride like those in Roper and Graham. By
detouring around a categorical ruling against all life without parole
sentences for juveniles, the Court rejected a rule that would have
afforded both uniformity and predictability to a process that is fraught
with opportunities for prejudice and error. The worst of it is that those
who were sentenced to die in prison when they were as young as
fourteen may yet be re-condemned to live out that sentence.

remarking that “[a]s in the federal system, states have been able to increase the predictability and
uniformity of their sentencing through guidelines”); Michael McNeill, Crack, Congress, and the
Normalization of Federal Sentencing: Why 12,040 Federal Inmates Believe That Their Sentences
Should Be Reduced, and Why They and Others Like Them May Be Right, 63 MERCER L. REV. 1359,
1360 (2012) (discussing the convergence of the fight against the “crack epidemic” and the United
States Sentencing Commission’s adoption of federal sentencing guidelines to promote uniformity
and predictability in federal criminal sentencing).

(discussing problems with narrowness).
224. Sunstein, Beyond Judicial Minimalism, supra note 222, at 825.
225. See Bronner, supra note 135.