A New Look at Contract Mistake Doctrine and Personal Injury Releases

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A New Look at Contract Mistake Doctrine and Personal Injury Releases

Grace M. Giesel*

"[C]ourts cannot make for the parties better agreements than they themselves have been satisfied to make." ¹

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¹ Green Cty. v. Quinlan, 211 U.S. 582, 596 (1909).
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INTRODUCTION

Given the policy in favor of enforcing contracts in general and the specific
policy in favor of and enforcing agreements that are a part of a settlement, one
might expect a court to look very skeptically when a party to a personal injury

2 Courts rarely set aside contracts of any kind. See Davis v. G N Mortgage Corp., 244 F. Supp. 2d 950, 956 (2003) (“A bedrock principle of contract law is pacta sunt servanda, which translates from Latin as ‘agreements must be kept.’”). This reticence to set aside a contract is a result, at least in part, of the notion that enforcement of contracts honors the policy of freedom of contract that underpins our society’s system of economic ordering by protecting justified expectations, providing stability to transactions, and honoring the autonomy of the individual to enter into the transaction of that individual’s choice. Professor John Edward Murray explained as follows: “If people cannot project their realistic needs, desires and aspirations into the future and be assured that they will be fulfilled, their creative energies will not be released. The social institution of contract is an indispensable condition, not only to economic freedom, but freedom, itself.” John Edward Murray, Jr., Murray on Contracts § 1, at 3 (5th ed. 2011); see also discussion infra Section VI.A.

3 In addition to the general desire to enforce contracts, courts also state that they favor and encourage the settlement of disputes outside of courts. Courts acknowledge the need to respect settlement agreements because the finality of those agreements is a vital part of the policy of encourage settlements. See Schmidt v. Smith, 216 N.W.2d 669, 672 (Minn. 1974) (“To permit them [release settlements] to be vacated except for the most compelling reason creates ‘uncertainty, chaos, and confusion’ with respect to future dispositions, and is a disservice to other litigants whose matters are thereby delayed”) (quoting Simons v. Schiek’s, Inc., 145 N.W.2d 548, 553 (Minn. 1966) (Otis, J., dissenting)); see also discussion infra Section VI.B.
release asks a court to set aside the release. But many courts have reacted atypically when injured parties who have settled their claims have sought to have those releases set aside on the basis of a lack of understanding or knowledge about the injury. Absent facts supporting a claim of fraud or duress, injured parties have turned to the mistake doctrine for relief.

Injured parties make, implicitly or explicitly, two separate claims when urging that they should not be held to the releases they signed. First, the injured parties—the releasors—claim that they entered into the releases suffering from mistakes about injuries suffered. For example, an injured party might agree to release the tortfeasor for injuries suffered when she knows that she has suffered a concussion. Later, she might seek to avoid the release after she discovers that a result of the incident is a seizure disorder and she was therefore mistaken as to the injury. Second, because in the typical situation, such a party signs a document that states that the injured party releases the other party regarding all injuries, even those unknown, the injured party must also convince the court that the written release should not be interpreted to apply to unknown injuries or that the words of the written release should be, simply, disregarded.

In this setting many courts have devised unique techniques to tilt the playing field in favor of the injured party. These techniques involve idiosyncratic application of the mistake doctrine, novel attitudes toward written contract language, and even the creation of an added analysis of whether the release was fairly and knowingly made. In using these techniques, some courts, implicitly or explicitly, have engaged in a hindsight substantive review of the fairness of the deal. These courts are very lenient in the analysis of what constitutes a mistake, are very lenient regarding the requirement of mutuality of the mistake, do

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4 This article addresses releases that are in settlement of a claim regarding injuries already incurred by the releasing party. It does not address exculpatory agreements, sometimes also called releases, entered into before any injury occurs. Parties often challenge such exculpatory agreements as unenforceable because they are contrary to public policy. See, e.g., Combs v. W. Siloam Speedway Corp., 406 P.3d 1064, 1066–67 (Okla. Civ. App. 2017) (considering exculpatory release signed before car race attendance); Tayar v. Camelback Ski Corp., 47 A.3d 1190, 1198–99, 1203 (Pa. 2012) (considering exculpatory release signed before snow tubing).

5 See, e.g., Delpino v. Spinks, No. N13C-03-288, 2014 WL 4348236, at *1–3 (Del. Super. Ct. Aug. 22, 2014) (involving a plaintiff who signed a release while believing injury to be a shoulder strain but claimed mistake when he later learned injury was a labral tear requiring surgery); Ranta v. Rake, 421 P.2d 747, 749–51 (Idaho 1967) (explaining plaintiff signed release believing injury to be minor but claimed mistake when he later learned the injury was a herniated disc requiring surgery).

6 This is, in effect, what occurred in Gleason v. Guzman, 623 P.2d 378, 380 (Colo. 1981).

7 For example, in Maglin v. Tschannerl, 800 A.2d 486, 487 (Vt. 2002), the Vermont Supreme Court reviewed a release which related to “all injuries, known and unknown, both to the person and the property, which have resulted or may in the future develop from an accident . . . .” (emphasis in original); see also infra Part I (for other examples of release language).

8 See, e.g., Morta v. Korea Ins. Corp., 840 F.2d 1452, 1458–60 (9th Cir. 1988) (applying Guam law) (discussing these arguments).
not apply the conscious ignorance concept, and do not apply the traditional respect given to written agreements—thereby neglecting to acknowledge assumptions of the risk taken by the personal injury releasor in the written agreement.

For the situation to fit into the traditional mutual mistake framework, there must be a belief that is not in accord with the facts at the time the parties enter into the release. If a court takes a broad view of the situation, it might determine that as long as the injured party knew he or she was injured at the time of the release, then there was no mistake. Rather than take such an unforgiving path, some courts attempt the arguably impossible task of distinguishing a later-claimed injury as an injury unknown at the time of contracting rather than a consequence of an injury known at the time of the signing of the release. The courts then recognize the unknown injuries as legally cognizable mistakes.

Other courts adopt a broader view of what might constitute a mistake. These courts accept as sufficient a mistake about the nature or extent of the injury. Thus, the injury need not be unknown at the time of the release for it to be a cognizable mistake for purposes of the mistake doctrine.

Some courts assume the releasor shares the mistake. While mutual mistake doctrine requires that both parties to the release be mistaken, courts often do not address the question of whether the other party to the release, the re-

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9 Section 151 of the Restatement (Second) of Contracts states: “A mistake is a belief that is not in accord with the facts.” Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 151 (Am. Law Inst. 1981); see also Koam Produce, Inc. v. DiMare Homestead, Inc., 329 F.3d 123, 127 (2d Cir. 2003) (quoting Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 151). See discussion infra Section IV.A.

10 See, e.g., LaFleur v. C.C. Pierce Co., 496 N.E.2d 827, 830–31 (Mass. 1986) (explaining ignorance of injury required; ignorance of consequences insufficient); see discussion infra Section V.A.

11 See, e.g., Mangini v. McClurg, 249 N.E.2d 386, 391–92 (N.Y. 1969) (explaining that injured party was aware of hip pain yet court found evidence sufficient to survive summary judgment motion on the issue of whether hip injury was an unknown injury); see discussion infra Section V.A.

12 See discussion infra Section V.A.

13 See, e.g., Simmons v. Blauw, 635 N.E.2d 601, 604 (Ill. App. Ct. 1994) (explaining that mistakes about the nature and extent of injuries are legally cognizable); see also discussion infra Section V.B.

14 See, e.g., Simmons, 635 N.E.2d at 604 (explaining that mistake as to nature or extent is accepted for purposes of the doctrine); see also discussion infra Section V.B.

15 See, e.g., Gleason v. Guzman, 623 P.2d 378, 385–86 (Colo. 1981) (describing how the injured party survived a motion for summary judgment without a discussion of whether the other party was mistaken); see also Bernstein v. Kapneck, 430 A.2d 602, 607 (Md. 1981) (noting that other courts find mutual mistake without a finding of “mutual misconception of basic fact”).

16 Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 152 (Am. Law Inst. 1981); see, e.g., Steiner v. Am. Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad), 177 A.3d 1246, 1255 (D.C. 2018) (quoting Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 152); see also discussion infra Section IV.A.
leasee, shared the mistake with the releaser.\textsuperscript{17} Releasees must surely claim that they were not mistaken about the releaser’s injuries but were contracting to avoid further litigation and added expense. Some courts recognize the doctrine of unilateral mistake generally,\textsuperscript{18} but courts usually do not explicitly address application of that doctrine.\textsuperscript{19}

Courts also do not acknowledge the releaser’s conscious ignorance. With either mutual or unilateral mistake doctrine, there is no mistake if the injured party was aware or should have been aware of his or her lack of knowledge with regard to the extent of the injuries.\textsuperscript{20} This is a barrier for the injured party to successfully claim mistake because the injured party, as a sentient soul and given the vagaries of the human body, should know that he or she may not know the injuries or their consequences relating to the incident with any degree of certainty. The injured party knows that he or she does not know. Yet, courts rarely acknowledge this as a barrier for the injured party.\textsuperscript{21}

Finally, some courts do not give respect to the language of the written release in which the releaser assumes the risk of unknown injuries and consequences. Many personal injury releases state that the release is in exchange for the agreed compensation and that the release is for all liability for all injuries, known and unknown, relating to the incident involving the injuries.\textsuperscript{22} By this language the releaser assumes the risk of any injury not yet discovered at the time of the signing of the release. Mutual and unilateral mistake doctrine provides that the doctrine is not available to one who assumes the risk of the mistake even if there is a mistake.\textsuperscript{23}

Many courts attempt to minimize the effect of this release language by wrapping the consideration of the written document into the mistake analysis. Rather than analyzing whether the writing is reasonably susceptible to the two interpretations urged by the parties and then considering surrounding circum-

\textsuperscript{17} See, e.g., Gleason, 623 P.2d at 385–86 (describing how the injured party survived a motion for summary judgment without discussion of mistake regarding the other party).

\textsuperscript{18} See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 153; see also Greene v. Ablon, 794 F.3d 133, 147–48 (1st Cir. 2015) (explaining the doctrine of unilateral mistake is disfavored but does exist in Massachusetts); Gamewell Mfg., Inc., v. HVAC Supply, Inc., 715 F.2d 112, 116 (4th Cir. 1983) (holding that a unilateral mistake as stated in § 153 is recognized as a part of federal law).

\textsuperscript{19} But see Maglin v. Tschannerl, 800 A.2d 486, 490 (Vt. 2002) (noting the injured party presents a case of unilateral mistake, not mutual mistake).

\textsuperscript{20} See, e.g., Greene, 794 F.3d at 148 (applying Mass. law) (relying in part on Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154); see also Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(b).

\textsuperscript{21} See Christensen v. Oshkosh Truck Corp., 12 F.3d 980, 989 (10th Cir. 1993) (relying on Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(b) to deny claim of mistake in personal injury release setting); see also discussion infra Section IV.B.

\textsuperscript{22} See Maglin, 800 A.2d at 487. For other release examples see infra Part I.

\textsuperscript{23} See, e.g., Brandt v. MIT Dev. Corp., 552 F. Supp. 2d 304, 323 (D. Conn. 2008) (relying on Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(a) to refuse to set aside settlement agreement); see Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(a); see also discussion infra Section IV.C.
stances to interpret the words of the writing,\textsuperscript{24} some courts seem to be swayed by the releaser’s hindsight claim that he or she did not intend to release anything with regard to unknown injuries and do not give respect to the words used in the release itself.\textsuperscript{25} Other courts create a separate analysis as a second stage of the mistake analysis to determine whether the release itself was “fairly and knowingly” made, thus focusing, at least in part, on the substantive fairness of the deal.\textsuperscript{26}

The courts who apply the traditional contract doctrines in untraditional ways are guided by a host of motivations such as a desire to have the wrongdoer compensate the injured party in harmony with tort law theory. Some courts are motivated by a belief that the complexity of the human body creates a situation in which people cannot possibly understand what they are doing when they sign releases dealing with unknown injuries.\textsuperscript{27} Some courts are concerned that the release is the product of unequal ability and bargaining strength.\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, some courts seem motivated by compassion to protect releasors\textsuperscript{29} even when those releasors are represented by counsel at the time they entered into the release.\textsuperscript{30}

A few courts have refused to treat personal injury releases more favorably than other contracts. These courts find no persuasive reason to tilt the playing field to assist personal injury releasors in avoiding releases.\textsuperscript{31}

Courts’ idiosyncratic treatment of personal injury releases is not new. Regardless of the validity of the underlying assumptions and presumptions that motivated courts of the previous century,\textsuperscript{32} courts today should look with new

\textsuperscript{24} See discussion infra Section IV.C.
\textsuperscript{25} See, e.g., Ranta v. Rake, 421 P.2d 747, 750–53 (Idaho 1966); see also discussion infra Section V.C.
\textsuperscript{26} See, e.g., Finch v. Carlton, 524 P.2d 898, 901 (Wash. 1974) (en banc); see also discussion infra Section V.D.
\textsuperscript{27} See, e.g., Clancy v. Pacenti, 145 N.E.2d 802, 805 (Ill. App. Ct. 1957) (“[T]he most complicated and mysterious of all the things that are upon or inhabit the earth.”); see discussion infra Section VI.C.
\textsuperscript{28} See discussion infra Part VI.
\textsuperscript{29} See E. ALLAN FARNOWORTH, CONTRACTS 611–12 (4th ed. 2004) (“Courts have often been torn between sympathy for the injured party and the policy favoring compromise as a means of settling claims, and they have been swayed by many factors, such as unfairness, that are not germane to the issue of avoidance for mutual mistake.”). See also Bernstein v. Kapneck, 430 A.2d 602, 605 (Md. 1981) (“On the other side there are considerations, largely stemming from compassion, which impugne the larger number of courts to treat seemingly unambiguous and freely entered into personal injury releases as sui generis, so as to justify their permitting the releasor to renege on his bargain.”).
\textsuperscript{31} See, e.g., Bernstein, 430 A.2d at 607; Wheeler v. White Rock Bottling Co. of Or., 366 P.2d 527, 530 (Or. 1961); see also discussion infra Section V.E.
\textsuperscript{32} See Dan B. Dobbs, Conclusiveness of Personal Injury Settlements: Basic Problems, 41 N.C. L. REV. 665, 704–05 (1963); Harold C. Havighurst, Problems Concerning Settlement
eyes upon the question of whether personal injury releasors should enjoy more favorable treatment than other contracting parties. Courts should not continue to rely on approaches first adopted many decades ago without a fresh policy analysis.

Courts may conclude, as some courts have done in the past, that there is no good reason to provide greater contractual protection to an injured releasor who now claims that he or she did not know or understand the injury suffered. Perhaps the vagaries of bodily injuries in the twenty-first century are not so mysterious that they cannot be contemplated and understood—at least with the assistance of counsel. Perhaps the goal of tort law that seeks to ensure the wrongdoer compensates the injured does not require that personal injury releases be treated more favorably than more typical agreements in the mainstream of commerce. Perhaps contracting parties who sign releases for personal injuries need no special protection as the result of being weaker in ability or having a lesser bargaining position. Perhaps compassion alone cannot justify such special treatment. Such a conclusion means that claims of mistake will rarely succeed because the injured party will not have suffered a mistake at the time of contracting and, in any event, assumed the risk of any mistake by the language of the release and by conscious ignorance.

A releasor’s plea is not always doomed, however. All other contract avoidance doctrines are available as they are for any contract scenario. If such a party can prove fraud or duress, for example, a court may look favorably on the releasor’s claim that the release should be set aside. In addition, a releasor today has at hand the unconscionability doctrine, a doctrine that was not well-recognized when the courts began addressing personal injury releases under the banner of the mistake doctrine. In some cases a court might conclude that a personal injury release was unconscionable at the time of formation and thus should not be enforced.

A court, after careful policy analysis, may conclude that injured parties should receive additional protection if they seek to avoid releases on the basis of newly discovered or newly understood injuries. Such a conclusion does not lead inexorably to a court blindly following past practice and attempting to


33 See discussion infra Section V.E; see also Bernstein, 430 A.2d at 606 (“[O]ur society will be best served by adherence to the traditional methodology . . . .”).

34 See discussion infra Sections VII.A and VII.B.

35 See, e.g., Ford v. Phillips, 994 N.Y.S.2d 688, 691 (N.Y. App. Div. 2014) (“[A] motion to dismiss a complaint based solely upon a release should be denied when the plaintiff alleges fraud or duress in the release’s procurement.”) (citation omitted).

shove the square peg of personal injury releases into the round hole of traditional mistake and other contract doctrines. Nor should it mean that such a court should engage in a bare analysis of the substantive fairness of the deal.

If a court concludes that personal injury releasors should be treated more favorably than other contractors, the court should create a stand-alone process analysis akin to that used with releases of certain federal rights. Releases of certain federal rights, such as Title VII rights, must be knowing and voluntary.\textsuperscript{37} Federal courts have delineated factors to analyze and the evidence to consider in determining whether a release of federal rights is knowing and voluntary.\textsuperscript{38} If an injured party knowingly and voluntarily entered into the release, no substantive fairness analysis should second guess the deal struck by the parties.\textsuperscript{39} This approach provides added protection to the individual releasor while also honoring the basic tenets of contract law. Such an approach is forthright, and its rationale can be clear. Even so, a releasor will not often be able to shoulder the burden of proving that the release was not made knowingly and voluntarily, especially if that party was represented by counsel at the time the injured party signed the release.\textsuperscript{40}

Ultimately, in very many situations, injured parties must be held to the release they signed because such releasor signed in exchange for prompt payment; agreed to the exchange knowing that he or she might learn later of injuries or effects not realized at the time of the deal; and signed a clear and understandable document which placed the risk of unknown injuries and consequences on the releasor.

I. THE SETTING: THE TYPICAL CASE

In the typical case in which this sort of claim arises, a person is injured and then enters into an agreement relinquishing all claims relating to the incident.\textsuperscript{41} The release often states that the injured person relinquishes claims for all injuries relating to the incident whether those injuries are known or unknown.\textsuperscript{42} For example, in \textit{Maglin v. Tschannerl}, the Vermont Supreme Court reviewed a release with the following language:

\begin{quote}
For the sole consideration of $500.00 . . . the undersigned hereby releases and forever discharges [defendant] from any and all claims . . . causes of action or suits of any kind or nature whatsoever, and particularly on account of all injuries, known and unknown, both to the person and the property, which have re-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37} See discussion infra Part VIII.
\textsuperscript{38} See, e.g., Myricks v. Fed. Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 480 F.3d 1036, 1040 (11th Cir. 2007).
\textsuperscript{39} See id. at 1042–43.
\textsuperscript{40} See discussion infra Part VIII.
\textsuperscript{41} See, e.g., Maglin v. Tschannerl, 800 A.2d 486, 487 (Vt. 2002) (describing how plaintiff thinking she suffered whiplash in an automobile collision, signed a release of “all injuries, known and unknown” in exchange for $500 and then later discovered that her injuries were more significant).
\textsuperscript{42} Id.
sulted or may in the future develop from an accident which occurred on or about the 12th day of March, 1996.43

And in Sanger v. Yellow Cab Co., Inc., the Missouri Supreme Court quoted the release before it in part as follows:

FOR THE SOLE AND ONLY CONSIDERATION . . . to me/us paid, . . . , I/we hereby release and discharge . . . [the tortfeasor] from all claims of any kind or character which I/we have or may have against him or them, and especially because of all damages, losses or injury to persons or property, or both, whether known or unknown, developed, or undeveloped, resulting or to result from accident on or about September 18, 1969, . . . , and I/we hereby acknowledge full settlement and satisfaction of all claims of whatever kind or character which I/we may have against him or them by reason of the above mentioned damages, losses or injuries.44

In the typical case, after the injured party has signed the release and received the money that is the consideration supporting the release, the injured party claims that the release should be set aside because his or her injuries are not what the party thought at the time the release was signed. Bronson v. Hansel presents a good example.45 In Bronson, the plaintiff was injured in an automobile collision, after which she suffered from neck pain and was treated for a

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43 Id. (emphasis provided by the court).
44 Sanger v. Yellow Cab Co., 486 S.W.2d 477, 479 (Mo. 1972) (en banc) (emphasis added).

A sample release presented as one used by a common insurer and found online releases parties:

"[F]rom any and every claim, . . . in any way growing out of any and all personal injuries and consequences thereof, including, but not limited to, . . . any injuries which may exist but which at this time are unknown and unanticipated and which may develop at some time in the future, all unforeseen developments arising from known injuries, . . . resulting or to result from an accident that occurred . . . ."

She signed a release, entitled, “Release of All Claims,” in exchange for approximately $1,050. The release stated that the plaintiff was releasing all claims “growing out of any and all known and unknown, foreseen and unforeseen[,] bodily and personal injuries and property damage and the consequences thereof resulting from the accident” and that the plaintiff “declare(s) and represent(s) that there may be unknown or unanticipated injuries resulting from the . . . accident . . . and[,] in making [the r]elease[,] it is understood and agreed that [it] is intended to include such injuries.” Later, the injured party discovered that she suffered a herniated disc as a result of the accident. The plaintiff sued, claiming that the release should not be a barrier to her action to recover for her injuries because she had signed the release when mistaken about her injury.

II. CONTRACT DOCTRINE APPLIES

A settlement agreement is a contract, and thus traditional contract law principles apply. A release is, in effect, a settlement agreement and so, likewise,

46 Id. at 852. Many of the cases in which the issue arise involve automobile collisions but, of course, the issue can arise in other contexts as well. See, e.g., Gleason v. Guzman, 623 P.2d 378, 379–80 (Colo. 1981) (describing how vending machine fell on the injured party).
47 Bronson, 913 N.Y.S.2d at 852.
48 Id.
49 Id.
50 Id. See Hicks v. Sparks, No. 522, 2013, 2014 WL 1233698, at *2 (Del. Mar. 25, 2014). In Hicks, the plaintiff was in an automobile collision and suffered headaches and neck pain as a result. Id. at *1. After settling her claim for $4,000, she began experiencing additional pain which led to a diagnosis of cervical disk herniation requiring surgery. Id. The plaintiff sued, claiming that the release should not be a bar to her recovery because at the time of the release she had been mistaken about her injury. Id. at *1–2. She had believed the injury to be a cervical strain when in reality it was a herniated disc. Id. at *3. The release the plaintiff signed stated in part that the plaintiff “declares and represents that the injuries are or may be permanent and that recovery therefrom is uncertain and indefinite.” Id.; see also Delpino v. Spinks, No. N13C-03-288, 2014 WL 4348236, at *1 (Del. Super. Ct. Aug. 22, 2014). The plaintiff in Delpino was involved in an automobile collision. Id. He suffered from shoulder pain which he believed to be a strain. Id. In exchange for $750, he signed a release provided by the defendant’s insurer which stated:

It is understood and agreed that this settlement is in full compromise of a doubtful and disputed claim as to both questions of liability and as to the nature and extent of the injuries . . . it is understood and agreed that the undersigned rely(ies) [sic] wholly upon the undersigned’s judgment, belief and knowledge as to the nature, extent, effect and duration of said injuries and liability therefore.

Id. Later, he discovered that he had suffered a labral tear which required shoulder surgery. Id. at *2. The plaintiff sued and when the defendant moved for the matter to be dismissed on the basis of the release, the plaintiff claimed that the release was the product of a mutual mistake such that it should not be enforced. Id.
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traditional contract law principles apply, including traditional contract formation and interpretation principles. Once a party proves a release has been entered into, courts require the releasor to shoulder the burden of proving that the release should not be honored but rather should be set aside.

III. CONTRACT MISTAKE DOCTRINE

Injured parties throughout the years have sought to avoid releases on the basis that the injured parties were not aware of or did not fully understand the injuries suffered when they entered into the releases as part of settlements of claims and in exchange for remuneration. Injured parties have claimed that the releases should not be enforced because the parties to the releases shared a mutual mistake about the injuries.

III. Jan. 24, 2018, appeal docketed, No. 18-2626 (7th Cir. July 26, 2018) (“A settlement agreement is a contract, and it is governed by principles of state contract law.”).

52 See E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co. v. Fla. Evergreen Foliage, 744 A.2d 457, 462 (Del. 1999) (“A release is a form of contract with the consideration typically being the surrender of a claim or cause of action in exchange for the payment of funds or surrender or an offsetting claim.”).

53 See Washington, 2018 WL 558501, at *4 (“A release within a settlement agreement is also governed by contract law.”).


55 See Powell v. Omnicom, 497 F.3d 124, 128 (2d Cir. 2007) (“A settlement agreement is a contract that is interpreted according to general principles of contract law.”).

56 See, e.g., Witt v. Watkins, 579 P.2d 1065, 1069–70 (Alaska 1978) (“Once the party relying on a release establishes that it was given with an understanding of the nature of the instrument, the burden is on the releasor to show by clear and convincing evidence that the release should be set aside.”) (citation omitted); Ranta v. Rake, 421 P.2d 747, 752 (Idaho 1966) (“[T]he releasor has the burden of proving the reasons for setting aside the release by clear, satisfactory and convincing evidence.”).


Today, there are two recognized mistake doctrines that can cause a court to refuse to enforce a contract: mutual mistake and unilateral mistake. The stated definitions of the doctrines across jurisdictions vary.\textsuperscript{59} The Restatement (Second) of Contracts, with regard to both types of mistake, defines a “mistake” as “a belief that is not in accord with the facts.”\textsuperscript{60} A comment notes that “the erroneous belief must relate to the facts as they exist at the time of the making of the contract” and that a “party’s prediction or judgment as to events to occur in the future, even if erroneous,” is not a mistake.\textsuperscript{61}

The Restatement provides with regard to mutual mistake that:
1. both parties must share the mistake,
2. the mistake must be “as to a basic assumption on which the contract was made[,]”
3. the mistake must have a “material effect on the agreed exchange of performances,” and
4. the party seeking relief must not bear the risk of the mistake.\textsuperscript{62}

Unilateral mistake differs from mutual mistake in that only one party to the contract must be mistaken. In addition, “the effect of the mistake is such that enforcement of the contract would be unconscionable,” or that the other party caused or had reason to know of the mistake.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{59} Some jurisdictions adopt the Restatement approach. See, e.g., Rotunda v. Marriott Int’l, Inc., 123 A.3d 980, 984 n.4 (D.C. 2015); Hart v. Arnold, 884 A.2d 316, 333 (Pa. Super. Ct. 2005). Other jurisdictions have their own approach. See, e.g., Anderson Cty. v. Preston, 804 S.E.2d 282, 297 (S.C. Ct. App. 2017) (“A contract may be rescinded for mistake, if justice so requires, in the following circumstances: (1) whe[n] the mistake is mutual and is in reference to the facts or supposed facts upon which the contract is based; (2) whe[n] the mistake is mutual and consists in the omission or insertion of some material element affecting the subject matter or the terms and stipulations of the contract, inconsistent with the true agreement of the parties; (3) whe[n] the mistake is unilateral and has been induced by the fraud, deceit, misrepresentation, concealment, or imposition of the party opposed to the rescission, without negligence on the part of the party claiming rescission; or (4) whe[n] the mistake is unilateral and is accompanied by very strong and extraordinary circumstances which would make it a wrong to enforce the agreement, sustained by competent evidence of the clearest kind.”) (quoting King v. Oxford, 318 S.E.2d 125, 128 (S.C. Ct. App. 1984)).


\textsuperscript{60} See \textit{RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS} § 151 (AM. LAW INST. 1981).

\textsuperscript{61} See id. § 151 cmt. a.

\textsuperscript{62} See id. § 152.

\textsuperscript{63} See id. § 153.
With both mutual mistake and unilateral mistake, a party bears the risk of the mistake and cannot use the mistake doctrine to his or her benefit in three situations. First, a party cannot use the mistake doctrine if the parties have allocated the risk to that party by agreement; in such a situation the parties have, in advance, confronted the possibility that there could be errors but deal with how that should be handled by agreement. The agreement that a party entered into while mistaken can, and usually does, itself allocate the risk and saves the document’s validity. Second, a party cannot use the mistake doctrine if that party entered into the agreement with “conscious ignorance.” A party is “consciously ignorant” if the party knows he or she lacks information about the issue to which the mistake relates but enters into the agreement anyway. Third, a court may place the risk on a party because “it is reasonable in the circumstances to do so.”

IV. TRADITIONAL APPLICATION OF CONTRACT DOCTRINE TO THE TYPICAL PERSONAL INJURY RELEASE SITUATION

A personal injury releasor has four tremendous hurdles blocking the way to success of a mutual mistake claim. First, the releasor must prove that the mistake at the heart of the basic assumption of the deal is about the facts as they existed at the time the release was entered into and not simply a speculation or prediction of the future. Second, the injured party must prove that the injured party and the releasee shared a mistake about the injured party’s injuries. Third, the injured party cannot have been acting in conscious ignorance, and fourth, the agreement cannot have placed the risk on the injured party by its own terms.

A. A Shared Mistake of Fact and Not a Speculation or Prediction

A party seeking to avoid a personal injury release likely cannot prove that he or she acted with “a belief that is not in accord with the facts.” A logical view of the situation at the time an injured party agrees to a release in exchange for recompense is that the injured party is speculating that his or her injuries will not become something other than what the injured party knows at the time of the signing of the release. An injured party weighs what he knows of his injuries, the amount of money being offered, and the value to that party of having

64 See id. § 154(a), cmt. b.
66 See RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS § 154 cmt. c.
67 See id. § 154(b).
68 See id. § 154(c).
69 See id. § 151 cmt. a.
70 See id. § 152 cmt. a.
71 See id. § 154(a), (b), cmt. c.
72 See id. § 151; see also discussion supra Part III.
that money immediately without the hassle of further haggling, lawsuits, and such.

Even if an injured party can prove that her or she was mistaken, in the vast majority of situations that party cannot prove that the other party to the release shares the mistake. The releasee, too, is speculating. The releasee hopes that the injuries and their consequences do not change but seeks to settle the matter so that there is certainty and closure short of extended litigation.\(^{73}\)

Often the injured party has legal counsel.\(^{74}\) The basic professional obligation of competence requires such counsel to bring home to the injured party the possibility of later discovered physical effects of the precipitating event.\(^{75}\) If an injured party with the benefit of the advice of counsel enters into a release as part of the settlement of a matter, a successful claim of mutual mistake is hard to fathom.

**B. The Injured Party Has the Risk of Mistake by Conscious Ignorance**

In the vast majority of these situations the injured party cannot survive the conscious ignorance analysis. This is especially true when the injured party has the benefit of the advice of an attorney at the time of the signing of the release. In *Wood v. Boynton*, a classic conscious ignorance case, a woman brought a stone to a shop to sell because she needed money.\(^{76}\) Neither she nor the shopkeeper knew what the stone was, but both thought it was a topaz.\(^{77}\) The shopkeeper bought the stone for a dollar.\(^{78}\) Later, the parties discovered that the stone was a diamond.\(^{79}\) The seller of the stone claimed mistake and asked the court to set aside the contract of sale.\(^{80}\) The court refused, noting that the seller chose to sell without further investigation of its composition.\(^{81}\) The seller sold knowing she did not know with certainty the composition of the stone.\(^{82}\)

In the release setting, to avoid the conscious ignorance bar, injured parties must claim that they did not perceive the uncertainty of their medical condition. Given the society in which injured parties live—a society which bombards

\(^{73}\) See, e.g., Boccarossa v. Watkins, 313 A.2d 135, 137 (R.I. 1973) (describing how releasee did not share the mistake); Maglin v. Tschannerl, 800 A.2d 486, 490 (Vt. 2002) (explaining that at most the injured party has proved unilateral mistake).

\(^{74}\) See, e.g., Morta v. Korea Ins. Corp., 840 F.2d 1452, 1454 (9th Cir. 1988).

\(^{75}\) See [Model Rules of Prof’l Conduct r. 1.1 (Am. Bar Ass’n 2013)](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba-www/images/sections/professional_education/ethics/model_rules_of_professional_conduct_2013_with_app.pdf) (“A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.”).

\(^{76}\) Wood v. Boynton, 25 N.W. 42, 43 (Wis. 1885).

\(^{77}\) Id.

\(^{78}\) Id.

\(^{79}\) Id.

\(^{80}\) Id. at 44.

\(^{81}\) Id. (“If she chose to sell it without further investigation as to its intrinsic value . . . she cannot repudiate the sale because it is afterwards ascertained that she made a bad bargain.”).

\(^{82}\) Id.
people with information of all sorts, including medical knowledge—this claim seems far-fetched. As one court has noted: “There was, of course, at the time of settlement negotiations, as in every personal injury case, a conscious uncertainty regarding the medical outcome of the victim’s case. At the time of settlement, both parties undertook a risk that the resolution of the uncertainty might be unfavorable.”

In addition, many injured parties enter releases in exchange for compensation only after consulting an attorney. Such an attorney, if competent, surely explained to the injured party the possibility that not all injuries or effects of injuries had manifested at the time the injured party considered the release. Thus, the attorney made the injured party aware of his or her ignorance about injuries. The involvement of an attorney makes an injured party’s claim of lack of conscious ignorance particularly suspect. A rational explanation for the situation is that the injured party, after consultation with counsel, understood that further injury or complications could occur and yet that party preferred the certainty of the payment in the short term rather than the chance of a payment in the long term after costly litigation.

C. The Release Places the Risk of Mistake on the Injured Party

In many situations mistake doctrine should not be available to the personal injury releasor, regardless of the releasor’s knowledge of injury, because the release placed the risk of any mistake regarding injuries on the releasor. When a contract allocates the risk of a particular type of mistake to a party, that party cannot rely on such a mistake to avoid the contract. A common scenario in which this issue arises is when a purchaser of land seeks to have the contract for sale set aside on the basis of a mistake about the possible uses of the land. Often such contracts provide that the purchaser is buying the property “as is.” Courts find that purchasers cannot rely on a mistake as to possible land use be-

84 See, e.g., Morta v. Korea Ins. Corp., 840 F.2d 1452, 1454–55 (9th Cir. 1988) (explaining that an attorney was consulted before the release was signed); Gleason v. Guzman, 623 P.2d 378, 380 (Colo. 1981) (also explaining an attorney was consulted before the release was signed).
85 This explanation would be required by the duty of competence all attorneys owe to their clients. See Model Rules of Prof’l Conduct r. 1.1 (Am. Bar Ass’n 2013) (“A lawyer shall provide competent representation to a client. Competent representation requires the legal knowledge, skill, thoroughness and preparation reasonably necessary for the representation.”).
86 See Harbor Ins. Co. v. Stokes, 45 F.3d 499, 503 (D.C. Cir. 1995) (holding party cannot claim mistake because party knew the matter had been appealed and a decision could be rendered at any time; settlement was made in conscious ignorance).
87 See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(a) (Am. Law Inst. 1981); see also discussion supra Part III.
89 See, e.g., id. at 210.
cause the “as is” language of the contracts placed the risk of the mistake on the purchasers.\footnote{See, e.g., id.; Atkins v. Kirkpatrick, 823 S.W.2d 547, 553 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1991).}

Typical personal injury releases refer expressly to the possibility of unknown injuries or effects on the releasor.\footnote{See supra Part I for examples of releases.} The court in \textit{Ranta v. Rake} reviewed a particularly explicit release which referred to “all known and unknown, foreseen and unforeseen bodily and personal injuries and property damage and the consequences thereof,” and then continued:

It is understood and agreed that this settlement is the compromise of a doubtful and disputed claim, and that the payment made is not to be construed as an admission of liability on the part of the party or parties hereby released, and that said releases deny liability therefor and intend merely to avoid litigation and buy their peace.

The undersigned hereby declare(s) and represent(s) that the injuries sustained are or may be permanent and progressive and that recovery therefrom is uncertain and indefinite and in making this Release it is understood and agreed, that the undersigned rely(ies) wholly upon the undersigned’s judgment, belief and knowledge of the nature, extent, effect and duration of said injuries and liability therefor and is made without reliance upon any statement or representation of the party or parties hereby released or their representatives or by any physician or surgeon by them employed.

\ldots

THE UNDERSIGNED HAS READ THE FOREGOING RELEASE AND FULLY UNDERSTANDS IT.\footnote{Ranta v. Rake, 421 P.2d 747, 749 (Idaho 1966).}

Regardless of whether the document states that the party has read it, a party who signs a document is held to have read it.\footnote{See Giaccone v. Canopius U.S. Ins. Co., 133 F. Supp. 3d 668, 674 (D.N.J. 2015) (applying N.J. law) (“Indeed, signing a contract creates a conclusive presumption that the signer read, understood, and assented to its terms.”) (citation omitted) (internal quotation marks omitted); Anzueto v. Wash. Metro. Area Transit Auth., 357 F. Supp. 2d 27, 30 (D.D.C. 2004) (“[I]t is well established that a person has a duty to read a contract before he signs it. If he had the opportunity to read it, he is bound by its terms regardless of whether he thought he was signing an actual contract.”) (citation omitted).} As the Supreme Court stated long ago in \textit{Upton v. Tribilcock}, “It will not do for a man to enter into a contract, and, when called upon to respond to its obligations, to say that he did not read it when he signed it, or did not know what it contained.”\footnote{Upton v. Tribilcock, 91 U.S. 45, 50 (1875).}

The language of this \textit{Ranta} release or any other typical release is such that the result of any interpretation analysis must conclude that the release clearly places the risk of unknown injuries on the injured party. In modern contract law, a court determines a party’s assent to an agreement by looking at the external or objective manifestations of intentions.\footnote{See, e.g., Lucy v. Zehmer, 84 S.E.2d 516, 522 (Va. 1954); see also Murray, supra note 2, § 31, at 62.} The focus is on what the other
party would reasonably believe as a result of the party’s manifestations of as-
sent. The objective approach means that when a court evaluates what the par-
ties intended by the words used in the document they signed, the court should 
focus on how each party’s words and actions would be reasonably perceived by 
the other party.

A court entertaining a releasor’s plea to not enforce a release of “all inju-
ries, known and unknown,” acts with this objective view as background. Even 
assuming the parol evidence rule is not an obstacle to the admission of evi-
dence relating to the deal struck, and with the court considering all evidence 
proffered by the releasor, the releasor has a difficult path to success in arguing 
that the words of the release should be interpreted to not place the risk of any 
mistake as to injuries squarely on the releasor.

When parties seek to have courts interpret the meaning of agreements, 
courts look to the writing and, often, to extrinsic evidence to interpret the 
writing and to determine whether the writing is reasonably susceptible to the 
meanings suggested by the parties. Some courts give the writing more weight

96 See Farnsworth, supra note 29, § 3.6, at 115 (“By the end of the nineteenth century, the 
objective theory had become ascendant and courts universally accept it today.”); see also 
Greene v. Ablon, 794 F.3d 133, 147 (1st Cir. 2015) (applying Mass. law (“Although mutual 
assent is often misleadingly referred to as a ‘meeting of the minds,’ the formation of a valid 
contract under Massachusetts law requires objective, not subjective, intent.”) (citation 
 omitted).

97 See Skycom Corp. v. Telstar Corp., 813 F.2d 810, 814 (7th Cir. 1987) (“‘Intent’ does 
ot invite a tour through [the plaintiff’s] cranium, with [the plaintiff] as the guide.”); see also 
Westlake Invs., LLC v. MLP Mgmt., LLC, 842 F. Supp. 2d 1119, 1126 (S.D. Iowa 2012) 
(“Mutual assent is determined from objective evidence. When interpreting a settlement 
agreement the primary concern is to determine the intention of the parties: [e]vidence of the 
parties’ mutual intent is what matters.”) (internal citation omitted) (quoting Peak v. Adams, 
799 N.W.2d 535, 544 (Iowa 2011)).


99 See Bernstein v. Kapneck, 430 A.2d 602, 607 (Md. 1981) (“[P]arol [sic] evidence ordi-
narily is inadmissible to vary, alter or contradict a contract, including a release, that is complete 
and unambiguous, in the absence of ‘fraud, accident or mutual mistake.’”) (quoting McLain v. Pernell, 
258 A.2d 416, 418 (Md. 1969)); see generally Juanda Lowder Daniel, K.I.S.S. the Parol Evidence Rule 
Goodbye: Simplifying the Concept of Protecting the Parties’ Written Agreement, 57 Syracuse L. Rev. 
227, 248 (2007) (discussing the rule and its exceptions). For a general discussion of the parol 
evidence rule, see Murray, supra note 2, §§ 83, 86, at 416, 442.

100 Eustis Mining Co. v. Beer, Sondheimer & Co., Inc., 239 F. 976, 982 (S.D.N.Y. 1917) 
(“[T]here is a critical breaking point . . . beyond which no language can be forced[,]”).

(“External indicia of the parties’ intent other than written words are useful, and probably in-
dispensable, in interpreting contract terms. If each judge simply applied his own linguistic 
background and experience to the words of a contract, contracting parties would live in a 
most uncertain environment.”); see also E. Farnsworth, “Meaning” in the Law of Con-

102 See, e.g., Mellon Bank, N.A., 619 F.2d at 1011 (“If a reasonable alternative interpretation 
is suggested, even though it may be alien to the judge’s linguistic experience, objective 
evidence in support of that interpretation should be considered by the fact finder.”) (citation
and require a finding of ambiguity within the document itself before considering evidence other than the writing.\textsuperscript{103}

A typical generic contract interpretation approach is presented in \textit{Engineered Abrasives, Inc. v. American Machine Products and Service, Inc.}\textsuperscript{104} In that case, the parties settled a matter in a commercial setting that included a release provision in which Engineered Abrasives agreed as follows:

\begin{quote}
[Engineered Abrasives] . . . hereby releases [American] . . . from any . . . claims, . . . liabilities, obligations, damages, costs, attorneys’ fees, expenses, actions, and/or causes of action of every nature, . . . whether known or unknown, suspected or unsuspected, which it ever had, now has, or may hereafter claim to have by reason of any matter, . . . whatsoever arising or occurring prior to and including the date of the Agreement, including but not limited to the claims and defenses set forth in the Action.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

As part of this settlement and in exchange for the release, Engineered Abrasives was to receive $75,000, an injunction against slander by American Machine, and a $250,000 liquidated damages provision supporting the injunction.\textsuperscript{106} After the settlement, American Machine introduced the release in a separate trade secret matter in which Engineered Abrasives had obtained a $714,814 default judgment against American Machine, claiming that the release applied to this earlier matter.\textsuperscript{107}

Engineered Abrasives claimed that the release did not apply to the trade secret matter, noting that the parties, in developing the settlement that included the release, did not discuss or refer to the trade secret matter and that the compensation given in exchange for the release was only approximately one-tenth

\textsuperscript{103}See also Alyeska Pipeline Serv. Co. v. O’Kelley, 645 P.2d 767, 771 n.1 (Alaska 1982) (rejecting approach that requires finding of ambiguity before extrinsic evidence can be considered to interpret).

\textsuperscript{104}\textit{Engineered Abrasives, Inc. v. Am. Mach. Prods. & Serv., Inc.}, 882 F.3d 650, 653 (7th Cir. 2018).

\textsuperscript{105}\textit{Id.} at 651–52.

\textsuperscript{106}\textit{Id.} at 651.

\textsuperscript{107}\textit{Id.} American Machine did so via Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 60(b). \textit{Id.} at 652.
of the amount of the default judgment.108 The court, applying Illinois law, affirmed the lower court’s finding that the release unambiguously applied to the trade secret matter.109 Because the writing was unambiguous, the court refused to consider evidence extrinsic to the writing, stating that “[c]ourts look to the language of the settlement agreement to determine the parties’ intent unless the agreement is ambiguous.”110 The court noted the significant discrepancy between the $75,000 settlement amount and the $714,814 default judgment, but stated that, because the document was not ambiguous, the parties’ reasoning in settling for so little was “outside the scope of a court’s inquiry.”111

If a court applies traditional contract principles to the situation of personal injury releases, it is likely the court will determine that the releasor, by signing the release, agrees to release the other party regarding all injuries, even those unknown at the time of the signing of the release. The injured party takes on the risk of unknown injury in exchange for compensation and the extinguishment of the risk of receiving no compensation or less compensation later.112

The language of the typical personal injury release is not unduly complex, nor is the entire transaction itself complex.113 The release document is typically not lengthy—only a page or two pages.114 While the releasee often controls language of the release, the releasor commonly negotiates the compensation with the releasee or the releasee’s representative.115 The injured party presents evidence of the injury that he or she claims resulted from the actions of the other party and the releasor and releasee or the releasee’s agent negotiate an ap-

\[108\] Id. at 652.
\[109\] Id. at 654–55.
\[110\] Id. at 653.
\[111\] Id. at 654–55. Note that Illinois courts treat personal injury releases very differently. See discussion infra Section V.B. For another example of a typical approach, see Goldberg v. Goldberg, 428 A.2d 469, 474–75 (Md. 1981) (“[W]here a contract is plain and unambiguous, there is no room for construction, and it must be presumed that the parties meant what they expressed.”) (quoting Kasten Constr., v. Rod Enters., Inc., 301 A.2d 12, 18 (Md. 1973)).
\[112\] See Hicks v. Sparks, No. 522, 2013, 2014 WL 1233698, at *2 (Del. Mar. 25, 2014) (“A release is a device by which parties seek to control the risk of the potential outcomes of litigation. Releases are executed to resolve the claims the parties know about as well as those that are unknown or uncertain. Because litigation is inherently risky, a general release avoids the uncertainty, expenses, and delay of a potential trial.”).
\[113\] See the following sample releases: Full Release of All Claims with Indemnity, supra note 44; Parents/Guardian Release and Indemnity Agreement, supra note 44; Release and Settlement of Claim, supra note 44; Release in Full of All Claims, supra note 44; and Release of All Claims, supra note 44.
\[114\] All of the sample releases referenced in supra note 113 are one page with the exception of one which is two pages.
\[115\] See, e.g., Hicks, 2014 WL 1233698, at *1 (explaining the releasee initially offered Hicks $2000; Hicks countered with $7000; the releasee then offered $2500; Hicks countered with $5000; the releasee then offered $3000; Hicks reiterated a demand of $5000; the releasee then offered $4000 which Hicks accepted); Witt v. Watkins, 579 P.2d 1065, 1067 (Alaska 1978) (noting release was signed five months after automobile collision and after negotiation of amount).
propriate amount without undue haste.\textsuperscript{116} The releasor then, often after consultation with an attorney, signs the release.\textsuperscript{117} The releasor seeks money in the short term without further expense or delay while the releasee seeks to end the matter efficiently.\textsuperscript{118} In this situation, it is a difficult argument to assert that the proper interpretation of the words of the writing is that the risk of unknown injury is \textit{not} given to the releasor.\textsuperscript{119}

\textbf{D. Traditional Application of the Unilateral Mistake Doctrine to the Typical Personal Injury Release Situation}

An injured party claiming unilateral mistake avoids the hurdle of proving that the mistake is shared, but encounters the similarly difficult hurdle of proving “a belief that is not in accord with the facts.”\textsuperscript{120} Likewise, an injured party claiming unilateral mistake would likely bear the risk of the mistake as the result of being consciously ignorant.\textsuperscript{121} As is true with a claim of mutual mistake, it is also very likely that the release puts the risk of the mistake on the injured party and thus renders the party unable to use the unilateral mistake doctrine.\textsuperscript{122}

In addition, the unilateral mistake doctrine, at least under the Restatement formulation, adds to the injured party’s burden by requiring that the mistake be caused by the other party, or that the other party have reason to know of the injured party’s mistake or that enforcement of the release would be unconscionable.\textsuperscript{123} Unlike the stand-alone unconscionability doctrine which focuses on un-

\textsuperscript{116} In Hicks, the automobile collision occurred in March and the release of the adverse party’s liability was signed in October. Hicks was treated by a physician and presented her injuries to the representative of the releasee. The releasee initially offered Hicks $2000. Hicks countered with $7000. The releasee then offered $2500. Hicks countered with $5000. The releasee then offered $3000. Hicks reiterated a demand of $5000. The releasee then offered $4000 which Hicks accepted. Hicks, 2014 WL 1233698, at *1; see also Witt, 579 P.2d at 1066–67 (release signed five months after automobile collision and after negotiation; information about injury gained from treating physicians).

\textsuperscript{117} See, e.g., Hicks, 2014 WL 1233698, at *1 (explaining Hicks consulted two attorneys who advised to wait at least a year); Simmons v. Blauw, 635 N.E.2d 601, 603 (Ill. App. Ct. 1994) (noting attorney negotiated on plaintiff’s behalf).

\textsuperscript{118} See generally Dobbs, supra note 32, at 665–66 (discussing the benefits of settlement in general).

\textsuperscript{119} Arthur L. Corbin, \textit{The Parol Evidence Rule}, 53 \textit{Yale L.J.} 603, 623 (1944) (“The more bizarre and unusual an asserted interpretation is, the more convincing must be the testimony that supports it. At what point the court should cease listening to testimony that white is black and that a dollar is fifty cents is a matter for sound judicial discretion and common sense.”).

\textsuperscript{120} See Restatement (Second) of Contracts §§ 151, 153 cmt. a, b (Am. Law Inst. 1981); see also discussion supra Part III and Section IV.A.

\textsuperscript{121} See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(b); see also discussion supra Part III and Section IV.B.

\textsuperscript{122} See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 154(a); see also discussion supra Part III and Section IV.C.

\textsuperscript{123} See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 153; see also discussion supra Part III.
conscionability at the time of the formation of the release, the focus of the unilateral mistake doctrine unconscionability analysis is the possible unconscionable effect of enforcing the document. Injured parties, assuming they could prove mistake, might make a colorable claim that the effect of the release is unconscionable by presenting evidence that the injured party gave the release in exchange for a very small compensation in light of the ultimately discovered injuries of the releasor.

E. Conclusions about Traditional Application of the Mistake Doctrine

If a court applies traditional contract doctrine, an injured party cannot often succeed in having a release rescinded. For both doctrines, the situation does not present a recognizable mistake, but instead presents a mistake in prediction or speculation. For mutual mistake, there is the added problem of the mistake not being shared. And with regard to both doctrines, the releasor has the risk of unknown injury as a result of conscious ignorance and the language of the release itself. That language is usually clear and does not lend itself to an interpretation other than that the injured party releasor takes the risk that there are injuries or consequences that the releasor does not fully perceive or understand.

V. COURTS’ TREATMENT OF PERSONAL INJURY RELEASES

Courts struggle with applying mistake doctrine to personal injury releases in the situation of later claimed injuries. Courts have a difficult time determining whether the injured party was mistaken about a fact at the time of contracting or, rather, simply speculating about the future, consciously ignorant of the true physical state of his or her body. Not only is the existence of a mistake a sticky wicket, the issue of the mutuality of the mistake is one not often addressed by the courts, although it is a requirement of the mutual mistake doctrine. Courts also struggle with the language of the release in terms of mistake doctrine and traditional written contract treatment.

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124 See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 208; see also discussion infra Section VII.C.
125 See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 153 (“the effect of the mistake is such that enforcement of the contract would be unconscionable”).
126 See, e.g., Schmidt v. Smith, 216 N.W.2d 669, 670–71 (Minn. 1974) (explaining the injured party settled for $2,100 but later sued for $95,000 claiming that she released the releasor when she thought she suffered from muscular strain but later had disc removal and spinal fusion surgery as a result of cervical disc syndrome); see also LaFleur v. C.C. Pierce Co., 496 N.E.2d 827, 829 (Mass. 1986) (describing that in a matter arising from a workplace injury, the injured party signed a release in exchange for $4,000 thinking he had a toe injury; he sued to set aside the release after he had both legs amputated above the knee as a consequence of the accident).
127 See discussion supra Sections IV.A, IV.B; see also infra Sections V.A, V.B.
128 See, e.g., Ranta v. Rake, 421 P.2d 747, 753 (Idaho 1966) (explaining that the lower court dismissed but the appellate court reversed on the basis of the releasor’s intent only). Occasionally, courts do address whether the other party to the release was mistaken. See, e.g.,
A. Mistake Doctrine Applies with an Unknown Injury But Not with an Unknown Consequence of a Known Injury

Because mistake doctrine requires that the mistake be one of fact existing at the time of the signing of the release, some courts state that the mistake doctrine can apply to a situation in which the injured party is not aware of the injury at the time of the release. If, however, the injured party is aware of the injury but not its consequences, there is no mistake because the injury existed and was known at the time of the release. The contract mistake doctrine can apply to a mistake of diagnosis but not one of prognosis.

For example, in Mangini v. McClurg the injured party, resisting enforcement of the release she had executed, claimed that at the time of the signing of the release her hip injury was unknown. No doctor had identified the hip injury, though she was experiencing pain in the hip. Examining physicians believed the hip pain to be related to a back strain and a hematoma with no lasting consequences. The New York court stated the test as follows:

A mistaken belief as to the nonexistence of presently existing injury is a prerequisite to avoidance of a release. If the injury is known, and the mistake, it has been said, is merely as to the consequence, future course, or sequelae of a known injury, then the release will stand.

In effect, with this analysis, if a releasor knows of an injury and releases the other party, the releasor has assumed the risk of further consequences of that injury. No claim of mistake is therefore possible.

Boccarossa v. Watkins, 313 A.2d 135, 137 (R.I. 1973) (finding releasee did not share the mistake); Beaver v. Estate of Harris, 409 P.2d 143, 148 (Wash. 1965) (determining releasee did not share the mistake).

See discussion supra Section IV.C and infra Sections V.C., V.D.


Id.

The court in La Fleur v. C.C. Pierce Co., 496 N.E.2d 827 (Mass. 1986), noted:

[The great weight of authority in other jurisdictions supports the view that a release of claims for personal injuries may be avoided on the ground of mutual mistake if the parties at the time of signing the agreement were mistaken as to the existence of an injury, as opposed to the unknown consequences of known injuries.

Id. at 831. The LaFleur court adopted that approach in finding that there was evidence that the injured party had an unknown injury since the earlier diagnosis was a toe injury and the later issue was a circulatory problem resulting in leg amputation. Id. at 832; see also Oliver v. Clark, 537 N.W.2d 635, 640–41 (Neb. 1995) (“Oliver, to avoid the release in this case, must demonstrate that his present condition is not the result of the development of an injury known at the execution of the release, but is an injury that was wholly unknown at the release’s signing.”); Nevue v. Close, 867 P.2d 635, 636–37 (Wash. 1994) (applying this approach).

Mangini, 249 N.E.2d at 388.

Id.

Id. at 389.

Id. at 391.

See, e.g., Hicks v. Sparks, No. 522, 2013, 2014 WL 1233698, at *3 (Del. Mar. 25, 2014) (“Hicks assumed the risk of mistake when she signed the Release without obtaining a more
The Mangini court, in reviewing the matter before it, opined that the injured party had put forth sufficient evidence to survive the other party’s motion for summary judgment on the issue of mistake.\textsuperscript{138} Though the injured party was aware of pain in her hip area, no hip injury had been contemplated at the time of the signing of the release.\textsuperscript{139} Thus, the hip injury was unknown at the signing of the release.\textsuperscript{140}

As the facts of this case illustrate, this analysis requires courts to delve into the high weeds of the injuries. The Mangini court acknowledged the difficulty of applying the test stating, “The distinction, a well-established one, is more easily expressed than applied in practice, and as a result the cases, it will be seen, do not classify perfectly.”\textsuperscript{141} Indeed, such an analysis seems ill-suited for judges who are trained in the art of words, not medicine. It leads to bizarre situations in which courts must decide issues such as whether a completely severed nerve is a new and different injury than a partially severed nerve when the nerve being considered is the same,\textsuperscript{142} or whether an injured party’s knowledge of a neck injury means that the herniated disc diagnosis later revealed to the injured party is not a new, previously unknown injury.\textsuperscript{143} Addressing the difficulty of the test, the Michigan Supreme Court in Denton v. Utley stated: “Yet we may well ask, as a practical matter (as distinguished from a verbal technique) is it possible to completely divorce diagnosis from prognosis? Is there not an interrelation, even if not an interdependence?”\textsuperscript{144}
Note that once a court using this analysis decides that there is or may be a recognizable mistake, the court must then face the issue of the value to bestow on the release that may allocate the risk of that unknown injury.\textsuperscript{145}

B. \textit{Mistake about the Nature or Extent of the Injury Coupled with an Unconscionable Result}

In contrast, Illinois courts recognize a mistake for purposes of the mistake doctrine even if the claimed mistake relates to the extent of a known injury.\textsuperscript{146} These courts, acknowledging that the approach applies only to releases dealing with personal injuries,\textsuperscript{147} also require the party seeking to have the release set aside to prove that the effect of enforcement of the release would be unconscionable given the facts eventually known about the injury.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{145} Not impossible, to draw a distinct line of separation between mistakes relating to present and future facts.

\textsuperscript{146} See, e.g., Simmons v. Blauw, 635 N.E.2d 601, 604 (Ill. App. Ct. 1994) ("A unilateral or self-induced mistake as to the nature and extent of the plaintiff's injuries is insufficient to void a clear and unambiguous release, and the mistake of fact must be mutual, material to the transaction, and affect its substance") (citation omitted); Newborn v. Hood, 408 N.E.2d 474, 476 (Ill. App. Ct. 1980) ("Numerous cases have considered the extent and nature of the injury as eventually manifested in determining conscionability and mutual mistake") (citation omitted). Courts of other jurisdictions may use a similar standard. See, e.g., Taylor v. Liberty Mut. Ins. Co., No. 01-A-01-9210-CV00420, 1994 WL 24311, at *3 (Tenn. Ct. App. Jan. 26, 1994) ("Accordingly, both the Supreme Court and this court have declined to enforce general releases of insurance claims when the parties have been mutually mistaken concerning the nature or seriousness of the claimant's injuries.").

\textsuperscript{147} See, e.g., Simmons, 635 N.E.2d at 604 ("[C]ases which have determined the validity of releases based on a mistake of fact with respect to the nature and extent of the plaintiff's injuries have been treated \textit{sui generis}, and the rules governing releases from liability for non-personal injury torts or breaches of contracts do not apply.").

\textsuperscript{148} In \textit{Newborn}, the court stated:

The modern trend is to set aside releases of personal injury claims in situations where the facts, when finally known, present an unconscionable result because of the equitable principle of doing justice under the circumstances of each case. . . . Thus, it is clear that all the facts, including those which become known after the release has been executed, must be considered in determining whether there was a mutual mistake of fact and whether or not the settlement is unconscionable. 

In *Simmons v. Blau*, the injured party claimed that when she signed the release in exchange for compensation of $5,082, she thought that she had suffered a muscular strain in her back as a result of an automobile collision. She later discovered that she had suffered a herniated disc requiring surgery costing $15,000 and was not able to work. The injured party, with the benefit of advice of counsel, had released the releasee from all claims for “all injuries, known and unknown, . . . which [had] resulted or may in the future develop from [the] accident.”

The court stated that in determining whether the releasor had a cognizable mistake, the court should consider the following: “[W]hether (1) the parties believed the plaintiff had recovered at the time of the release, (2) the condition was one which ordinary x-rays and customary examination did not reveal, and (3) the evidence justified the conclusion that the plaintiff acted with reasonable diligence in ascertaining the extent of injury.”

The court concluded that the evidence showed only that the releasor, not the released party, may have labored under a mistake. In addition, the court concluded that the effect of enforcing the release was not unconscionable.

In contrast, the court reached the opposite result in *Newborn v. Hood*. In *Newborn*, the injured party was treated for injuries resulting from an automobile collision. After signing the release with the benefit of advice of counsel, in exchange for compensation, the releasor suffered congestive heart failure related to the accident and incurred expenses exceeding the settlement amount. The court found mutual mistake and, focusing on the monetary effect alone, determined that enforcing the release would have an unconscionable result.

### C. Special Scrutiny of the Written Release as Part of the Mistake Analysis

Some courts begin the discussion with the mistake doctrine but detour to an analysis of what the injured party intended to release. For example, in *Witt v.*
Watkins, the Alaska Supreme Court shifted its focus away from determining whether there might be a mutual mistake or a disfavored unilateral mistake, and away from any analysis involving a discernment of mistake as to injury as opposed to mistake as to unknown effect of known injury. The court stated:

Niceties of distinction between the extent of a known injury or a difference in the character of the injury should not be determinative. In either event, the decision as to whether the release is enforceable should hinge on whether the releasor, at the time of signing the release, intended to discharge the disability which was subsequently discovered.

The court then directed consideration of factors such as:
1. “the manner in which the release was obtained—including whether it was hastily secured at the instigation of the releasee;”
2. “whether the releasor was at a disadvantage because of the nature of his injuries;”
3. “whether the releasor was represented by counsel;”
4. “whether [the releasor] relied on representations of the releasee or a physician retained by the releasee”;
5. “whether liability was seriously in dispute”;
6. “[t]he relative bargaining positions of the parties”; and
7. “the amount to be paid . . . .”

In Witt, the releasor initially was treated for bruised ribs as a result of an automobile collision. He continued to have pain in his back, which was diagnosed as related to a bladder problem probably unrelated to the accident. After settling the matter for $3,000 with the benefit of counsel, the releasor discovered he had suffered two broken vertebrae, probably as a result of the accident. In refusing to grant summary judgment for the releasee, the court noted that there was no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the releasee, that

\[\text{Watson v. Watkins, 579 P.2d 1065, 1068 (Alaska 1978) (“[T]he preservation of agreements entered into in good faith and the encouragement of settlement of disputes” are interests that “may still be preserved without adhering to rigid formulas dependent upon whether mistakes are unilateral or mutual.”).} \]

\[\text{Id. at 1069 (“[W]e deliberately have not preserved the additional artificial distinction between cases involving a known injury which proves to be much more serious than believed, and an injury different in type from that originally known.”).} \]

\[\text{Id.} \]

\[\text{Id. at 1070. In Casey v. Proctor, 378 P.2d 579, 588–89 (Cal. 1963) (en banc), the court noted the following factors to consider when deciding whether a release was knowingly made and bars an action for later discovered personal injuries: (1) “the amount of consideration received compared with the risk of the existence of unknown injuries”; (2) “the presence of bargaining and negotiation leading to the settlement”; (3) “the closeness of the issue of liability”; (4) “whether the subject of personal injuries was discussed”; and (5) “the reasonableness of the contention that the injuries were in fact unknown at the time the release was executed.”} \]

\[\text{Witt, 579 P.2d at 1066.} \]

\[\text{Id. at 1067.} \]

\[\text{Id.} \]
the releasor had enjoyed the assistance of counsel, and that the release was not the product of haste and was not induced by the releasee or his agents. Yet, the court concluded that because the releasor had no knowledge at the time of entering into the release that he suffered from two broken vertebrae, “A question is presented as to whether the fractured vertebrae caused any increased disability, and particularly, as to whether such disability, if any, was of a type substantially different from the possibilities of disability considered by Witt at the time he signed the release.”

This approach deviates significantly from traditional mistake doctrine and traditional views of the value of a written agreement. The court appears to be applying an analysis of the injured party’s subjective intent without giving much if any weight to the release itself. The analysis seems unmoored from the language of the document entirely. In effect, this approach appears to be a substantive fairness analysis—at least in part.

D. Special Scrutiny of the Written Release When the Releasor Acts with an Otherwise Cognizable Mistake

New York courts look first for a cognizable mistake for purposes of the mistake doctrine and do so using the unknown injury/unknown consequence distinction. Once a court finds a cognizable mistake, the court must then deal with the language of the release. According to courts in New York, a release typically stating that the releasor releases the other party with regard to all injuries, known and unknown must be “fairly and knowingly made.” As the court in Mangini v. McClurg noted, however, if it is apparent from the language of the release and the surrounding circumstances that the releasor released the

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166 Id. at 1070.
167 Id.
168 See discussion supra Section IV.C.
169 See Gleason v. Guzman, 623 P.2d 378, 387 (Colo. 1981), in which the court found summary judgment improper for an injured party’s claims though the injured party’s guardian had entered into the settlement and signed the release two years after the injury and with the assistance of counsel. There had been negotiation and the probate court approved the release. Id. at 380; see discussion of traditional doctrine supra Section IV.C.
170 See discussion supra Section V.A.; see also Mangini v. McClurg, 249 N.E.2d 386, 391 (N.Y. 1969).
171 See, e.g., Mangini, 249 N.E.2d at 390 (“[T]he traditional bases for setting aside written agreements, namely, duress, illegality, fraud, or mutual mistake, must be established or else the release stands.”).
172 See releases quoted and discussed supra Part I.
173 See, e.g., Mangini, 249 N.E.2d at 392 (quoting Farrington v. Harlem Sav. Bank, 19 N.E.2d 657, 657 (N.Y. 1939)); see also Ford v. Phillips, 994 N.Y.S.2d 688, 690 (N.Y. App. Div. 2014). Washington follows a similar approach. See Del Rosario v. Del Rosario, 97 P.3d 11, 14 (Wash. 2004) (en banc) (“A release may be avoided if (1) there is an unknown or latent injury discovered after the release was executed and (2) the plaintiff proves the release was not fairly and knowingly made.”) (citation omitted); Finch v. Carlton, 524 P.2d 898, 901 (Wash. 1974) (en banc) (finding the same).
other party from all liability even for unknown injuries, so be it.\textsuperscript{174} Indeed, the court noted that a circumstance such as this was very likely:

It requires particular emphasis that, more often than not, the releasors in personal injury cases are willing to settle for relatively small sums or sums that do not discount injuries unknown at the time because of the doubtful liability of the releasee, even when ordinary caution would suggest awaiting the development of unknown injuries or consequences. When that is the inducement it would be false reasoning to assume that the amount of the settlement or the precipitousness of effecting the settlement is corroborative of a mutual mistake.\textsuperscript{175}

While more bounded than the approach used in the \textit{Witt} case, this approach also is, at least in part, a substantive fairness analysis. Because the approach also focuses on whether the release was knowingly made, there also appears to be a focus on whether in fact the release was formed as a result of proper process.

\textbf{E. Applying Traditional Doctrine in the Traditional Way}

Some courts have refused to set aside releases on the basis of a claim of mistake relating to the injuries suffered.\textsuperscript{176} In \textit{Bernstein v. Kapneck}, the Maryland court, writing in the early 1980s, reviewed the treatment personal injury releases had received across the United States historically and refused to set aside the release before it.\textsuperscript{177} In \textit{Bernstein} a child suffered injuries as a result of an automobile collision.\textsuperscript{178} Approximately three years after the collision and after consulting with counsel, the child’s mother entered into a release in exchange for $7,500.\textsuperscript{179} After the settlement the child began exhibiting a seizure

\textsuperscript{174} Mangini, 249 N.E.2d at 391 (holding that a release must be enforced if the language of the release or circumstances show “a conscious and deliberate intention to discharge liability”).

\textsuperscript{175} Id.

\textsuperscript{176} See, e.g., Coomer v. Phelps, 172 S.W.3d 389, 391–92 (Ky. 2005). The Coomer court reaffirmed the rule of the jurisdiction set out in \textit{Trevathan v. Tesseneer}, 519 S.W.2d 614 (Ky. 1975), that a lack of knowledge or understanding about injuries at the time of the signing of a release is not a recognizable mistake for purposes of setting aside the release. The court stated:

To retreat from this rule would cast great doubt on the finality of releases in this state and unnecessarily complicate settlement considerations. As the Court noted in \textit{Trevathan}, “[t]his rule favors the orderly settlement of disputes and avoids multiplicity of suits and the chaos which would result if the releases were not treated seriously by the courts.” We see no need to retreat from this rule, thus we expressly reaffirm the holding of \textit{Trevathan}.


\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Bernstein}, 430 A.2d at 605.

\textsuperscript{178} Id. at 603 (describing that the child had a facial laceration, chip fractures of the nasal bones, a fracture of a shoulder, and traumatic neurosis).

\textsuperscript{179} Id. The release stated in part:
disorder related to the collision.\textsuperscript{180} The mother sought to have the release set aside.\textsuperscript{181} Thus, the court was faced with a very compelling case in terms of compassion.

But the Bernstein court took a different route, noting that many courts have been motivated by compassion for the insured to set aside “long established and well understood rules of contract law, which . . . normally apply to releases.”\textsuperscript{182} The court acknowledged that some courts may be motivated by a desire to prevent an injured party from becoming a public charge.\textsuperscript{183} The court also noted the competing policies of encouraging compromise, of honoring the freedom of contract, and of applying traditional contract rules.\textsuperscript{184}

With regard to findings of mistake by other courts, the Bernstein court noted that the courts reach their results by “an utterly inappropriate application of the mutual mistake of fact doctrine to factual circumstances which not only do not present a mutual misconception of basic fact, but often do not appear to involve a mistake by even one party.”\textsuperscript{185} The court did not believe that “violence to the human body presents a unique situation” that would validate “the bastardization of the well-founded principles concerning mutual mistake of fact.”\textsuperscript{186}

With regard to interpretation, the court stated: “[W]e are convinced that our society will be best served by adherence to the traditional methodology for interpreting contracts in general, including other species of releases.”\textsuperscript{187} In criticizing the approach taken by other courts, the Bernstein court stated:

This approach often overlooks or avoids the words used by the parties to express their agreement and in its place substitutes undefined conjecture as to what the releasor would have intended if the full extent of the injuries had been known at the time of the compact. Thus, these courts depart from the otherwise settled rules of construction which, for the most part, have operated satisfactorily for

\textsuperscript{180} Id. at 604 (emphasis omitted).
\textsuperscript{181} Id.
\textsuperscript{182} Id. at 605 (citation omitted).
\textsuperscript{183} Id. at 606. The Bernstein court criticizes other courts for not “openly balancing these policies” in reaching their conclusion in favor of the injured party. Id. at 607.
\textsuperscript{184} Id. at 606.
\textsuperscript{185} Id. at 607.
\textsuperscript{186} Id. at 607–08.
\textsuperscript{187} Id. at 606.
centuries, in order to dispose of particularly distressing cases in a compassionate and seemingly just manner.\footnote{Id. at 607.}

Finally, the Bernstein court turned to the release before it, which released all claims relating to “bodily injuries, known and unknown.”\footnote{Id. at 604; see supra note 179 for the release language.} The court concluded that “[i]t would require turning the English language on its head to conclude that, from these words used, the releasors did not by this document exhibit a clear desire to extinguish the claim for the damages they now seek.”\footnote{Bernstein, 430 A.2d at 609.}

Similarly, in Morta v. Korea Insurance Corporation, the court reached the issue of the value to be given to the writing.\footnote{Morta v. Korea Ins. Corp., 840 F.2d 1452, 1455 (9th Cir. 1988) (applying Guam law).} In Morta, a party injured in an automobile collision, after consulting with counsel, signed a release in exchange for compensation.\footnote{Id. at 1454–55.} Later, the injured party claimed that the release was the product of fraud, undue influence, or mistake in that he did not read the release and did not understand that it applied to injuries of which he was not aware.\footnote{Id. at 1455, 1457–58. The injured party claimed that he was not aware of a blood clot in his brain that necessitated surgery. Id. at 1455, 1458.} The federal court, applying Guam law, found no evidence of fraud or undue influence.\footnote{Id. at 1456–57.} In addition, the court found no mistake because the injured party had the opportunity to read the release and have it explained to him by his counsel.\footnote{Id. at 1458.}

Addressing the claim that the release should not be read to apply to unknown injuries, the Morta court noted that the release was unambiguous and, by its terms, the injured party released the other party from all claims “growing out of any and all known and unknown, foreseen and unforeseen bodily and personal injuries and property damage” arising from the incident relating to the injuries.\footnote{Id. at 1458 n.7.} The injured party argued that the release should not be held to release unknown claims unless evidence extrinsic to the writing supported that interpretation.\footnote{Id. at 1459.} The court refused to adopt such an approach, choosing to rely on the writing, the release, and not on evidence extrinsic to that writing,\footnote{Id. (quoting Trevathan v. Tesseneer, 519 S.W.2d 614, 616 (Ky. 1975)).} noting that “it is exceedingly difficult [sic] to know what parties really thought

Written instruments, fixing the parties’ rights and responsibilities by mutual consent, bring an important measure of order to life and greatly facilitate the adjudicatory process. While interpreting contract language is not always easy, sticking to the words the parties actually used limits substantially the bounds of legitimate disagreement. This objective rule thus “favors the orderly settlement of disputes and avoids multiplicity of suits and the chaos which would result if the releases were not treated seriously by the courts.”\footnote{Id. (quoting Trevathan v. Tesseneer, 519 S.W.2d 614, 616 (Ky. 1975)).}
many years back and virtually impossible to divine what they would have thought had they but known something they did not."

**VI. THE POLICIES AT PLAY**

Why is it that some courts treat claims of mistake regarding personal injury releases differently? What is the basis for reforming the mistake doctrine so that a claim of mistake in a personal injury release setting is cognizable, or for short-circuiting established agreement interpretation canons? Several policies are at play. On the one hand are the policies in favor of enforcing contracts freely entered into and the policy in favor of encouraging settlement. On the other side of the ledger, courts have spoken of the unknowability of the human body and thus its injuries, a desire that injured parties be compensated by the wrongdoer and not become a public burden, the noncommercial context, and a need to protect injured parties because of their weakness or lesser bargaining position.

**A. Freedom of Contract Should Be Honored**

Courts enforce contracts unless there is a very good reason not to do so. There is a long-recognized understanding that keeping and enforcing promises has a moral dimension as well as a utilitarian one. Our system of economic ordering depends on individual actors being able to enter into agreements with regard to the future and have some degree of confidence that those agreements will be enforced. The parties’ expectations are honored and the transactional world enjoys stability. Enforcing contracts and therefore honoring freedom of contract also touches upon respect for the autonomy of each individual actor in that individuals contract as they see fit and the courts honor each individual’s choice. Thus, each actor has the right and power to contract as he or she chooses and courts honor that choice without second-guessing. This exercise of individual choice in contracting and the respect given that choice by courts’ enforcement of contracts is a facet of liberty. As the United States Supreme Court has held, public policy and the interests of society favor the utmost freedom of contract, within the law.

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199 Id. at 1460; see also Raymond v. Feldman, 853 P.2d 297, 299 (Or. Ct. App. 1993) (en banc) (noting mutual mistake is not a basis for setting aside a personal injury release).

200 See Diamond Match Co. v. Roeber, 13 N.E. 419, 422 (N.Y. 1887) (“[P]ublic policy and the interests of society favor the utmost freedom of contract, within the law . . . .”).

201 See MURRAY, supra note 2, § 1, at 2 (“Historically and philosophically, the most fundamental concept of contract is that promises ought to be kept.”).

202 See EV3, Inc. v. Lesh, 114 A.3d 527, 529 n.3 (Del. 2014) (“Delaware courts seek to ensure freedom of contract and promote clarity in the law in order to facilitate commerce.”) (citation omitted); see also MURRAY, supra note 2, § 6, at 15 (“By facilitating future exchanges, the institution of contract brings persons and resources together as a necessary condition to the operation of the market system.”).

203 See CHARLES FRIED, CONTRACT AS PROMISE: A THEORY OF CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATION 2 (2d ed. 2015) (“The regime of contract law, which respects the dispositions individuals make of their rights, carries to its natural conclusion the liberal premise that individuals have rights.”); see also Hodge v. Evans Fin. Corp., 707 F.2d 1566, 1568 (D.C. Cir. 1983) (“A
Court has stated, “[T]he right of private contract is no small part of the liberty of the citizen, and . . . the usual and most important function of courts of justice is . . . to maintain and enforce contracts . . .”

Even so, the courts have developed several narrow doctrines over the years for identifying situations in which the contract or its formation is flawed. In the rare situation in which the facts fit one of these doctrines, a court might rescind the contract to obtain a superior justice than would result from enforcing the contract. Today’s courts rarely set aside contracts or refuse to enforce contracts, but if they do, they do so because those contracts are the product of fraud, duress, mistake, or another recognized contract avoidance doctrine.

 Courts long have been wary of engaging in a review of the substantive fairness of an agreement and do so only when such a review is a part of a recognized doctrine such as unconscionability. For example, in Apfel v. Prudential-Bache Securities, Inc., the court stated:

Under the traditional principles of contract law, the parties to a contract are free to make their bargain, even if the consideration exchanged is grossly unequal or of dubious value. Absent fraud or unconscionability, the adequacy of consideration is not a proper subject for judicial scrutiny. It is enough that something of “real value in the eye of the law” was exchanged.

Thus, this freedom of contract carries with it a downside—the freedom to make an improvident deal. To honor the freedom of contract is to enforce the bad deal absent a recognized flaw addressed by a recognized contract avoid-

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206 The unconscionability doctrine does call for a substantive fairness review but usually only when linked with a procedural fairness analysis and in any case the review is done as of the time the contract was formed, not in hindsight. See discussion infra Section VII.C. A fairness analysis might also be a part of the unilateral mistake doctrine, at least as the doctrine is delineated by the Restatement, but there the analysis is also linked to a finding of blameworthiness on the part of the other party to the contract. See RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS § 153 (AM. LAW INST. 1981); see also supra Section IV.D.

207 Apfel v. Prudential-Bache Sec. Inc., 616 N.E.2d 1095, 1097 (N.Y. 1993) (citations omitted); see also Thomsen v. Famous Dave’s of Am., Inc., 606 F.3d 905, 911 (8th Cir. 2010) (“Whether Thomsen made a wise bargain is irrelevant, as unambiguous contract language ‘shall be enforced by courts even if the result is harsh.’”) (quoting Denelsbeck v. Wells Fargo & Co., 666 N.W.2d 339, 347 (Minn. 2003)); Edwin W. Patterson, An Apology for Consideration, 58 COLUM. L. REV. 929, 953 (1958) (reasoning courts should not delve into fairness analysis). See generally FARNSWORTH, supra note 29, § 4.1, at 218 (“[C]ourts have been most reluctant to view the problem in the first perspective, that of substantive unfairness.”).
B. Settlement of Disputes Outside of Courts Should Be Encouraged

Because releases settle disputes, the universally-recognized policy in favor of settlement is relevant. The starting point is the idea that settlement of controversies outside of courts is a positive result which courts should encourage. Courts recognized this policy long ago and continue to do so even in this time of plentiful settlements. The policy is present in court decisions and also is manifested in the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 16, which makes settlement a proper topic for the pretrial conference. Settlements have value only if they are respected, so it is the finality of settlement agreements—and releases that are part of settlement agreements—which furthers the policy of encouraging settlement. The motivating rationale for this pro-settlement policy is a blend of ideas. First, is the idea that when matters are decided by settlement, there is less burden on the judicial system. Some courts also note that settlement is easier on the parties because it reduces the financial and emotional strain that litigation brings.

208 Sanger v. Yellow Cab Co., 486 S.W.2d 477, 482 (Mo. 1972) (en banc); see also United Food & Commercial Workers Union v. Lucky Stores, Inc., 806 F.2d 1385, 1386 (9th Cir. 1986) (“Wise or not, a deal is a deal.”).


210 See Peak v. Adams, 799 N.W.2d 535, 543 (Iowa 2011) (citing the long-held view that settlements should be encouraged); see also St. Louis Mining & Milling Co. v. Mont. Mining Co., 171 U.S. 650, 656 (1898) (“[S]ettlements of matters in litigation, or in dispute, without recourse to litigation, are generally favored . . . .”). With regard to the commonness of settlements, see Theodore Eisenberg & Charlotte Lanvers, What is the Settlement Rate and Why Should We Care?, 6 J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUD. 111, 146 (2009) (stating that about two-thirds of civil cases settle).

211 See Fed. R. Civ. P. 16(a)(5), (c)(2)(I); see also Fed. R. Civ. P. 16 advisory committee’s note to 1983 Amendment (The amendments “explicitly recognize[] that it has become commonplace to discuss settlement at pretrial conferences” and “it obviously eases crowded court dockets and results in savings to the litigants and the judicial system”).


214 See, e.g., Vill. of Kaktovik v. Watt, 689 F.2d 222, 231 (D.C. Cir. 1982) (stating that settlement allows the parties to avoid the expense and delay that accompanies litigation); see also David M. Trubek et al., The Costs of Ordinary Litigation, 31 UCLA L. REV. 72, 91–92 (1983) (discussing the financial burden).

tion and the associated risks can cause. Settlement is also a way that parties can have more control over the result than is possible in litigation.\textsuperscript{216}

C. \textit{Bodily Injuries Are Not Commercial and Are Too Mysterious for the Common Person to Understand; Injured Parties Are in Need of Protection Because of Weakness or Bargaining Disparity; Injured Parties Must Be Compensated}

Several motivations may be at work when a court chooses to give special treatment to personal injury releasors who seek to avoid their releases. Those attempting to understand motivations note that the situation is not truly commercial and so some of the underpinnings of contract enforcement do not apply.\textsuperscript{217} Some courts inclined to apply particularly favorable analysis to injured parties seeking to avoid releases have focused on the fact that a personal injury release deals with the person and the body, and that there is something unknowable about the workings of the human body.\textsuperscript{218} Another motivation seems to be a belief that the injured party needs protection, either because such a person is somehow weak or simply as a result of bargaining disparity.\textsuperscript{219} Some courts seem concerned that the blameworthy party will enjoy a windfall at the expense of the injured party or the public coffers.\textsuperscript{220} Of course, another implicit if not explicit motivation is a desire to impose what, in retrospect, appears to be a substantively fair result.\textsuperscript{221}

\textsuperscript{216} See, e.g., Natare Corp. v. Aquatic Renovation Sys., Inc., 987 F. Supp. 695, 700 (S.D. Ind. 1997) (“Settlements . . . allow the parties to fashion the outcome of their disputes through mutual agreement.”).

\textsuperscript{217} See Perillo, supra note 205, § 28.34, at 174 (“Social policies favoring the assumption of entrepreneurial risks as a means of improving market efficiency are not present.”); see also Ricketts v. Pa. R.R. Co., 153 F.2d 757, 767 (2d Cir. 1946) (Frank, J., concurring) (explaining that the consistency needed in commercial setting is not needed here).

\textsuperscript{218} See, e.g., Clancy v. Pacenti, 145 N.E.2d 802, 805 (Ill. App. Ct. 1957) (“[T]he most complicated and mysterious of all the things that are upon or inhabit the earth.”).

\textsuperscript{219} See, e.g., Ranta v. Rake, 421 P.2d 747, 751 (Idaho 1966) (addressing the inequality of bargaining positions); Clancy, 145 N.E.2d at 805 (addressing bargaining inequality).

\textsuperscript{220} See, e.g., Casey v. Proctor, 378 P.2d 579, 587 (Cal. 1963) (en banc) ("[I]f the releaser is bound by the literal terms of the release, it has been recognized that he is left to suffer personal injuries without compensation, while the releasee, who usually is an insurer, has received a windfall . . . ."); Bennett v. Shinoda Floral, Inc., 739 P.2d 648, 653 (Wash. 1987) (en banc) (discussing the policy of just compensation of injured parties by tortfeasors); see also Dobbs, supra note 32, at 667 (“But an equally individualistic principle says that the wrongdoer—not society, or the victim, or the victim’s family, but the wrongdoer—should pay.”). Of course, taken to its extreme, this argument could justify a position that allows no settlements at all. See 1 Dan B. Dobbs et al., \textit{The Law of Torts} § 13, at 26–27 (2d ed. 2011) (“Compensation of persons injured by wrongdoing is one of the generally accepted aims of tort law . . . . [U]ncompensated injured persons will represent further costs and problems for society.”).

\textsuperscript{221} In \textit{Ranta v. Rake}, the Idaho Supreme Court, writing in 1966 and looking back at earlier cases, noted that one concern was “the amount of consideration received compared to the risk of the existence of unknown injuries.” \textit{Ranta}, 421 P.2d at 751. See Wheeler v. White Rock Bottling Co. of Or., 366 P.2d 527, 530 (Or. 1961) (“Such cases simply hold that it is
The court in *Clancy v. Pacenti*, attempted to explain the motivating rationales relating to human biology being unknowable and not a commercial matter as follows:

In such cases it is not an article of commerce that is involved, but the human mind and body, still the most complicated and mysterious of all the things that are upon or inhabit the earth. Here, mistakes are easily made and the consequences are more serious than in any other of the affairs of man. A slight abrasion may mean nothing or it may lead to a malignancy. Insignificant pain may mean the beginning of a fatal coronary attack or only a slight intestinal disturbance. Yet, a man cannot and does not live in dread of these possibilities. He accepts assurances that all will be well, even though ultimate consequences cannot be appraised as in matters involving property or services.\(^{222}\)

The *Clancy* court also addressed the bargaining ability and power rationales, likening the situation of personal injury releases in general to the treatment historically given to releases signed by seamen when dealing with their employers.\(^{223}\) In this regard, the *Clancy* court stated:

The sharp economic inequality of the bargaining parties which generally exists in this class of cases has also been considered by the courts in their consideration of this doctrine. It is by no means as modern an innovation as to some may appear. Long before personal injury cases began to absorb the common law courts, the rule was applied to seamen in admiralty cases. That related to contracts between seamen and their employers, but no one can doubt that it has a considerable bearing upon situations such as are here presented.\(^{224}\)

Other earlier cases, like *Clancy*, rely in part on the historical treatment courts have given releases for seamen’s injuries.\(^{225}\) Traditionally, courts have viewed seamen as “wards of admiralty,” and have reviewed releases entered into by seamen with great scrutiny.\(^{226}\) In 1823 in *Harden v. Gordon*, the court stated the standards for the analysis as follows:

[Seamen] are emphatically the wards of the admiralty; and though not technically incapable of entering into a valid contract, they are treated in the same manner, as courts of equity are accustomed to treat young heirs, dealing with their expectancies, wards with their guardians, and cestuis que trust with their trustees. . . . If there is any undue inequality in the terms, any disproportion in the

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\(^{223}\) Id.

\(^{224}\) Id. (citation omitted).


\(^{226}\) *Garrett v. Moore-McCormack Co.*, 317 U.S. 239, 247–48 (1942). See *Karim v. Finch Shipping Co.*, 374 F.3d 302, 310 (5th Cir. 2004) (“Seamen, of course, are wards of admiralty whose rights federal courts are duty-bound to jealously protect.”) (quoting *Bass v. Phx. Seadrill/78, Ltd.*, 749 F.2d 1154, 1160 (5th Cir. 1985)). For a discussion of the origin of the treatment of seamen, see *Hume v. Moore-McCormack Lines, Inc.*, 121 F.2d 336, 345 (2d Cir. 1941) (concluding that at least some of the reason for the special treatment was commerce and national security which benefit when employees are induced to serve at sea).
bargain, any sacrifice of rights on one side, which are not compensated by extraordinary benefits on the other, the judicial interpretation of the transaction, is that the bargain is unjust and unreasonable, that advantage has been taken of the situation of the weaker party, and that pro tanto the bargain ought to be set aside as inequitable.227

In *Garrett v. Moore-McCormack Co.*, the United States Supreme Court, in reviewing a Jones Act case involving a seaman’s personal injury release, stated that the employer-releasee dealing with the seaman “must affirmatively show that no advantage has been taken; and his burden is particularly heavy where there has been inadequacy of consideration.”228

Some of the statements of rationale behind this special treatment seem loaded with assumptions and prejudices.229 For example, an early statement of supporting rationale refers to seamen as “a class of persons remarkable for their rashness, thoughtlessness and improvidence.”230

Some modern courts focus more on the issue of whether the seaman entered into the release knowingly and less on the substantive fairness of the deal. For example, in *Durley v. Offshore Drilling Company*, the court stated that the test is “whether, at the time of relinquishing his rights, the seaman had ‘an in-

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228 Garrett, 317 U.S. at 247. The *Garrett* court noted that this protection is not unusual in that Congress had taken other steps to protect seaman’s rights. See id. at 246; see also Rabenstein v. Sealift, Inc., 18 F. Supp. 3d 343, 355 (E.D.N.Y. 2014) (“[T]he burden is upon one who sets up a seaman’s release to show that it was executed freely, without deception or coercion, and that it was made by the seaman with full understanding of his rights.”) (quoting *Garrett*, 317 U.S. at 248).
229 See Havighurst, *supra* note 32, at 307 (“This rule had its origin in early times and is based upon the recognition that most seafaring men are as individuals relatively incapable of adequately protecting their own interests.”).

> On the one side are gentlemen possessed of wealth, and intent, I mean not unfairly, upon augmenting it, conversant in business, and possessing the means of calling in the aid of practical and professional knowledge. On the other side is a set of men, generally ignorant and illiterate, notoriously and proverbially reckless and improvident, ill provided with the means of obtaining useful information, and almost ready to sign any instrument that may be proposed to them; and on all accounts requiring protection, even against themselves.

*Hume* v. Moore-McCormack Lines, Inc., 121 F.2d at 341 (quoting *The Minerva*, 1 Hagg. Adm., 347, 355 (1825)). The *Hume* court also stated:

> Every court should watch with jealousy an encroachment upon the rights of seamen, because they are unprotected and need counsel; because they are thoughtless and require indulgence; because they are credulous and complying; and are easily overreached. . . . They are considered as placed under the dominion and influence of men, who have naturally acquired a mastery over them; and as they have little of the foresight and caution belonging to persons trained in other pursuits of life, the most rigid scrutiny is instituted into the terms of every contract, in which they engage.

Id. at 341 n.13 (quoting *Harden* v. *Gordon*, 11 F. Cas. 480, 485 (C.C.D. Me. 1823) (No. 6047)).
formed understanding of his rights and a full appreciation of the consequenc-
es.”231 The court noted that courts have been concerned with the adequacy of the settlement consideration only in regard to what that tells courts about the seaman’s understanding of the deal, not as a review of the substantive fairness of the deal.232

Perhaps these courts are acknowledging that earlier courts’ opinions of the contractual capabilities of seamen is no longer true if it ever was. Perhaps seamen of the twenty-first century do not require such paternalism as was presented in cases from an earlier time. Perhaps seamen should be treated like any other party who releases federal rights.233 In any event the broad class of parties who sign personal injury releases cannot be described as being incapable of evaluating their situations and weighing their choices and entering into valid releases in exchange for compensation.

Beyond the suggestions touching upon the injured party’s ability, courts have also justified lenient treatment of personal injury releasors by noting that releasors are often in a position of unequal bargaining strength.234 Interestingly, several courts dealing with the issue of enforcement of personal injury releases refer approvingly for rationale to a concurring opinion in Ricketts v. Pennsylvania Railroad Company, a case decided under the Federal Employers’ Liability Act (FELA).235 Judge Learned Hand wrote the majority opinion for the court,236 but some later courts dealing with personal injury releases have looked, not to the majority opinion, but to Judge Frank’s concurrence as a touchstone.237 This is true even though the Ricketts case involved a release of rights under FELA, federal law, not a release of state law rights, and even though the release was in the employee and employer context rather than the

231 Durley v. Offshore Drilling Co., 288 Fed. App’x 188, 190 (5th Cir. 2008) (quoting Borne v. A & P Boat Rentals No. 4, Inc., 780 F.2d 1254, 1256 (5th Cir. 1986)). See Rabenstein, 18 F. Supp. 3d at 355 (explaining releasor has the burden of proving that the seaman entered into the release freely, knowing and understanding his rights but if that is proven, the seaman will be bound).
232 Durley, 288 Fed. App’x at 190. See Steverson v. GlobalSantaFe Corp., 508 F.3d 300, 304 (5th Cir. 2007) (explaining the same).
233 Claims related to injuries to seamen are generally federal claims, often under the Jones Act, 46 U.S.C. § 30104 (2012). See, e.g., GlobalSantaFe Corp., 508 F.3d at 302. See infra Part VIII for a discussion of a modern federal approach.
234 See, e.g., Clancy v. Pacenti, 145 N.E.2d 802, 805 (Ill. App. Ct. 1957); see also Havighurst, supra note 32, at 308 (noting releasor has “experience, knowledge and economic power” so “many settlements are undoubtedly unfair”).
236 The majority opinion in Ricketts stated that the jury in the lower court could have found that the injured employee of the railroad authorized his attorney to settle only part of the claim and not to settle the entire matter. Ricketts, 153 F.2d at 760. Thus, the release that the employee signed at the direction of the attorney and that he could not read due to his injuries, was not a bar to the employee recovering against his employer, the railroad. Id.
context of automobile collisions as is true with many personal injury releases.\textsuperscript{238} In Judge Frank’s view, injured employees—when dealing with employers regarding releases—were in the same position as seamen since they were “no less helpless in their trafficking with their employers.”\textsuperscript{239} Judge Frank concluded that the employee of the railroad who arguably entered into a release of the railroad for his personal injuries, should be treated “as . . . if he were a seaman.”\textsuperscript{240}

Even if one accepts that seamen should receive protective treatment regarding personal injury releases in terms of heightened scrutiny of the release process or even the substantive fairness of the release as a result of weakness of bargaining position or ability of seamen, it is quite an analytical journey to reach Judge Frank’s position that employees under FELA are also weak in terms of bargaining position or ability such that they should be treated like seamen. It is then a further journey to the position that all personal injury releasors should enjoy special, favorable treatment as the result of weakness of bargaining position or ability.

VII. PERSONAL INJURY RELEASES SHOULD NOT RECEIVE SPECIAL TREATMENT

A. The Policies Do Not Require It

Traditional contract law provides that in order to protect the sanctity of contracts, contracts should be set aside only when a traditional doctrine demands that.\textsuperscript{241} The avoidance doctrines of mistake, duress, unconscionability, and such are situations in which the law recognizes that the contract or the process used to form it was flawed. When the question is the enforceability of personal injury releases, the releases should not be set aside unless those traditional doctrines, applied as they would be in other settings, dictate that result. The fact that the contracts at issue are, in effect, settlement contracts makes the situation one in which courts should especially take care to set aside only those contracts that are truly problematic under traditional doctrine analysis.

No policy put forward in support of providing more favorable treatment to personal injury releasors demands that preferential treatment. Personal injury releases deal with the body and are therefore not commerce in the same sense


\textsuperscript{239} Ricketts, 153 F.2d at 767 (Frank, J., concurring). Judge Frank stated that the United States Supreme Court in Garrett v. Moore-McCormack Co., 317 U.S. 239 (1942), had “broadly hinted that the courts should treat non-maritime employees, with respect to releases of personal injury claims, just as they treat seamen.” Id. at 760 (Frank, J., concurring). Judge Frank pointed to footnote seventeen of the Garrett case for this broad hint. Id. However, footnote seventeen simply noted several maritime cases as well as non-maritime cases that the Court referred to as “somewhat comparable.” Garrett, 317 U.S. at 248 n.17.

\textsuperscript{240} Ricketts, 153 F.2d at 769 (Frank, J., concurring).

\textsuperscript{241} See discussion supra Section VI.A.
that agreements relating to widgets are commerce—but releases are a sort of commerce nonetheless. The parties to the release are attempting to create certainty in a matter about which there is uncertainty. The releasor seeks compensation sooner rather than later and seeks the certainty of payment that may not occur at all if the parties do not agree to settle the matter. The releasor seeks to eliminate further worry and expense that would occur without the settlement. The other party likewise seeks to settle the matter without further time and money commitments. This party, too, seeks to end the matter and thus gain certainty with regard to the ultimate cost of the matter. There is always uncertainty about the injuries and their eventual path, just as there are uncertainties about whether a widget maker will be able to provide the widgets as agreed.

Nor is this unknowability regarding bodily injuries such that an injured party must be protected more than traditional contract doctrine otherwise provides. As the Oregon Supreme Court stated in Wheeler v. White Rock Bottling Company of Oregon:

When courts recite, for example, as a matter of more or less common knowledge, that terminal tumors sometimes begin with minor contusions, or otherwise concern themselves with details of tragedy that may stalk those who sign early releases, they are not announcing truths known only to lawyers. These matters are also commonly known by laymen.242

Perhaps members of society were less aware of the nature of human biology at some point in the past, but today the Wheeler court is correct. Members of society who are injured in automobile collisions and other accidents of life understand the possibilities of their injuries.

Similarly, the notion that the releasor in a personal injury release situation is somehow incapable of understanding the transaction he or she enters into when signing a release is, simply, preposterous. People who find themselves in automobile crashes are, one would imagine, a fair sampling of society as a whole: everyone gets into car accidents. Releasors are neither weaker of mind nor stronger of mind than the populace as a whole. It is not a complex notion that injuries from an automobile collision or other such event may not have manifested at the time of the signing of the release. The language of the releases, though perhaps awkward, is not difficult to understand. And a party who reads a document that says that in exchange for a certain sum of money that party is agreeing to forego all claims regarding known and unknown injuries or effects, can easily understand what that means. Unlike a loan document with complex payment and liability language,243 a personal injury release actually deals with a subject matter every person understands, his or her own body. The release is also a part of a fairly simple transaction, an exchange of compensa-

tion in exchange for a promise to look no more to the releasee. The release is typically not complex and comprises one or two pages.\footnote{See discussion \textit{supra} Part I.}

Further, because a personal injury release follows a calamitous event, parties of today are very often represented at the time they sign the release.\footnote{See, \textit{e.g.}, Morta v. Korea Ins. Corp., 840 F.2d 1452, 1458 (9th Cir. 1988).} These attorneys should be assisting the injured parties, their clients, in understanding the realm of possible outcomes regarding their injuries as well as assisting the injured parties in understanding exactly what the release means in terms of risk assumption.

In addition, an injured party is not necessarily in a bargaining position that would demand special treatment by the courts. The injured party may be the less sophisticated party to the settlement if the other side of the deal is, as is often the case, being handled by an insurer, but, again, the injured party often has the benefit of counsel. While the language of the release is often that of the releasee, the injured party can and often does negotiate with regard to the amount of compensation.\footnote{See, \textit{e.g.}, Hicks v. Sparks, No. 522, 2013, 2014 WL 1233698, at *1 (Del. Mar. 25, 2014) (explaining the releasee initially offered Hicks $2000; Hicks countered with $7000; the releasee then offered $2500; Hicks countered with $5000; the releasee then offered $3000; Hicks reiterated a demand of $5000; the releasee then offered $4000; Hicks accepted).} Ultimately, the injured party can refuse to settle the matter and opt to pursue litigation.

Finally, general tort policy that wrongdoers should compensate injured parties so those parties do not become a burden on society is too general a policy to justify special treatment for personal injury releases. With a personal injury release in exchange for compensation, the wrongdoer is compensating the injured party the amount the injured party agrees is sufficient. Is the law to say that the injured party cannot be the judge of that amount and that the courts should always be the ultimate decider? While the issue of the burden on society is not present in the commercial dispute setting, even there the policy of requiring the wrongdoer to compensate the harmed party is present. Should settlement agreements not be allowed? Tort policy should not trump contract policy in this way.

\subsection*{B. The Current Situation is Problematic for Traditional Doctrines}

As the Maryland court in Bernstein \textit{v. Kapneck} court stated, “violence to the human body” does not justify “the bastardization of the well-founded principles concerning mutual mistake of fact” or any other contract doctrine.\footnote{Bernstein \textit{v. Kapneck}, 430 A.2d 602, 607–08 (Md. 1981).} Not only is the policy justification for special treatment for personal injury releasors lacking, but also the courts, in applying the traditional mistake doctrine differently and in refusing to give traditional treatment to the releases signed by personal injury releasors, may be doing subtle harm to traditional contract doc-
trine. While mistake doctrine has never been the model of clarity, the treatment
courts have given personal injury releases under the guise of mistake doctrine
has done nothing to clarify the proper bounds of the doctrine. Indeed, while
such an effect cannot be measured, the bastardization of the doctrine may cause
damage to its rational application in other settings. In effect, to misuse it in the
personal injury release setting is to do damage to the doctrine for all purposes.
The same may be true for the value given the written document for purposes of
adding to it or interpreting its words.

In many cases, courts may be simply reviewing the releases on a substan-
tive fairness basis explicitly or surreptitiously. In contrast, courts generally
have not reviewed contracts for fairness. Courts have long noted that they
would not review adequacy of consideration—a fairness analysis; that was the
job of the parties to the contract. It is true that unconscionability doctrine al-

tows for a substantive fairness analysis, but most courts link that analysis with a
procedural analysis as well.

The superior approach is to treat personal injury releases as other contracts
are treated. Courts should not bend or reform current traditional contract doc-
trine to reach a result desired.

C. The Unconscionability Doctrine May Be Useful

Though mistake doctrine is not a useful doctrine when properly applied to
the situation of personal injury releases, unconscionability doctrine might be
useful just as duress and fraud could be useful with the right facts. Historically,
releasors seeking to have personal injury releases set aside have not turned to
the contract unconscionability doctrine as a means of achieving that end.

248 See Wheeler v. White Rock Bottling Co. of Or., 366 P.2d 527, 530 (Or. 1961) (“Such
cases simply hold that it is not fair to an injured tort victim to hold him to a bargain if it turns
out later that the bargain was grossly unwise.”).

249 See Ryan v. Weiner, 610 A.2d 1377, 1381 (Del. Ch. 1992), in which the court stated:
“The notion that a court can and will review contracts for fairness is apt for good reason to
strike us as dangerous, subjecting negotiated bargains to the loosely constrained review of
the judicial process.”

Apfel court stated: “Under the traditional principles of contract law, the parties to a contract
are free to make their bargain, even if the consideration exchanged is grossly unequal or of
dubious value. Absent fraud or unconscionability, the adequacy of consideration is not a
proper subject for judicial scrutiny.” Id. (citation omitted).

2017) (requiring both substantive and procedural unfairness); see also discussion infra Sec-
tion VII.C.

252 While some courts have examined whether a release has unconscionable effect as part of
a mistake doctrine analysis, such an examination of unconscionable effect considers the situa-
(applying an unconscionable effect analysis); Kelly v. Widner, 771 P.2d 142, 144–46 (Mont.
1989) (citing to Uniform Commercial Code unconscionability doctrine provision but consid-
ering post-contract evidence).
Though the concept of unconscionability has existed in the common law for a very long time, its clear recognition as a doctrine coalesced in the middle of the twentieth century with states’ adoption of the Uniform Commercial Code. Section 2-302 of the Code provides that a court may refuse to enforce a contract or a part of a contract on the basis of unconscionability. Section 2-302 states, in part:

If the court as a matter of law finds the contract or any clause of the contract to have been unconscionable at the time it was made the court may refuse to enforce the contract, or it may enforce the remainder of the contract without the unconscionable clause, or it may so limit the application of any unconscionable clause as to avoid any unconscionable result.

Following this example, the drafters of the Restatement (Second) of Contracts added a new unconscionability provision, Section 208, which states:

If a contract or term thereof is unconscionable at the time the contract is made a court may refuse to enforce the contract, or may enforce the remainder of the contract without the unconscionable term, or may so limit the application of any unconscionable term as to avoid any unconscionable result.

Courts have struggled to develop a principled approach to the unconscionability doctrine. Many courts follow a two-pronged analysis that focuses on procedural unconscionability and substantive unconscionability. An agreement or provision is procedurally unconscionable if it is the result of defective bargaining process. Substantive unconscionability is present when the agreement’s terms are unreasonably favorable to one of the parties to the deal. As one court has stated, “[s]ubstantive unconscionability occurs when

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253 See McCullough, supra note 36, at 787 (discussing the history of the doctrine and noting that the concept dates back to at least the seventeenth century; early cases were treated as public policy cases).


255 U.C.C. § 2-302 (AM. LAW INST. & UNIF. LAW COMM’N 2017). This provision applies only to goods transactions. See U.C.C. § 2-102 (“Unless the context otherwise requires, this Article applies to transactions in goods”).

256 See Restatement (Second) of Contracts § 208 (AM. LAW INST. 1981).


258 See Resource Mgmt. Co. v. Weston Ranch & Livestock Co., 706 P.2d 1028, 1042 (Utah 1985) (cataloguing all sorts of procedural bargaining irregularities); see also Murray, supra note 2, § 97, at 541.

259 See, e.g., Maxwell v. Fidelity Fin. Servs., Inc., 907 P.2d 51, 58 (Ariz. 1995) (“[C]ontract terms so one-sided as to oppress or unfairly surprise an innocent party, an overall imbalance
the terms of the agreement are so one-sided that no one in his right mind would agree to its terms.”260 Some courts require both forms of unconscionability, although some of these courts apply a sliding scale such that a lower level of one type of unconscionability can be offset by a greater level of the other type of unconscionability.261

One aspect of the doctrine that is clear is that the analysis of whether the contract or provision is unconscionable must consider the situation at the time of the contract’s formation.262 Both the Uniform Commercial Code and the Restatement explicitly state that the unconscionability must exist at the time the contract is made.263

Unfortunately, the typical personal injury releasor likely will not find the unconscionability doctrine to be a friendly port in the storm.264 Such a plaintiff must illustrate that the release was procedurally unconscionable.265 The typical release and settlement that the release is a part of is not a complex transaction.266 The plaintiff gets money in exchange for ceasing to pursue any claim in the obligations and rights imposed by the bargain . . .”); see also McCullough, supra note 36, at 797.

260 West v. West, 891 So. 2d 203, 213 (Miss. 2004).
261 See, e.g., Kindred, 403 P.3d at 1023 (“In other words, both the absence of meaningful choice and the presence of contract provisions unreasonably favorable to one party must be found in order to sustain a claim that a contract is unconscionable.”) (citing Roussalis v. Wyo. Med. Ctr., Inc., 4 P.3d 209, 246 (Wyo. 2000)); James v. Nat’l Fin., LLC, 132 A.3d 799, 815 (Del. Ch. 2016) (“The analysis is unitary, and ‘it is generally agreed that if more of one is present, then less of the other is required.’”) (quoting E. ALLEN FARNSWORTH, 1 FARNSWORTH ON CONTRACTS § 4.28, at 585 (3d ed. 2004)). With regard to the sliding scale nature of the analysis, see Wolowitz, 468 N.Y.S.2d at 145 (“However, in general, it can be said that procedural and substantive unconscionability operate on a ‘sliding scale’; the more questionable the meaningfulness of choice, the less imbalance in a contract’s terms should be tolerated and vice versa”) (quoting Jonathan A. Eddy, On the Essential Purposes of Limited Remedies: The Metaphysics of UCC Section 2-719(2), 65 CALIF. L. REV. 28, 41, 42 n.56 (1977)); see also Melissa T. Lonegrass, Finding Room for Fairness in Formalism—the Sliding Scale Approach to Unconscionability, 44 LOY. U. CHI. L.J. 1, 12 (2012). Other courts seem to allow a finding of unconscionability with only one form of unconscionability. See, e.g., Edwards v. Vemma Nutrition, No. CV-17-02133-PHX-DGC, 2018 WL 637382, at *5 (D. Ariz. Jan. 31, 2018) (requiring only substantive unconscionability).
262 See James, 132 A.3d at 814 (“Whether a contract is unconscionable is determined at the time it was made”); see also Doctor’s Assocs. v. Jabush, 89 F.3d 109, 113 (2d Cir. 1996) (explaining the same); Clift v. RDP Co., 200 F. Supp. 3d 660, 677 (W.D. Ky. 2016) (explaining the same).
263 See U.C.C. § 2-302 (AM. LAW INST. & UNIF. LAW COMM’N 2017) (“unconscionable at the time it was made”); RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS § 208 (AM. LAW INST. 1981) (“unconscionable at the time the contract is made”).
264 See, e.g., Maglin v. Tschannerl, 800 A.2d 486, 491 (Vt. 2002) (“Because she had an opportunity for meaningful choice when the release was presented to her, any differential in bargaining power was not critical to the contract’s formation and not enough to void the release as unconscionable.”).
265 See supra note 261 and accompanying text.
266 See supra note 113 and accompanying text.
against the other party.\textsuperscript{267} The actual release document is often one or two pages and the language used is relatively clear that the injured party is releasing his or her claim for all injuries related to the event, whether or not the injuries are known at the time of the release.\textsuperscript{268} The release is often the product of some negotiation over time with the actual amount to be paid changing in the midst of the back-and-forth.\textsuperscript{269} While it is certainly true that in most cases the injured party does not create the language of the release and simply accepts that language, it is also true that the injured party could refuse to enter into the agreement if the terms are unacceptable or could demand more in exchange for the executed release. Often, the releasor has the benefit of an attorney’s assistance as well.\textsuperscript{270} In such circumstances it is difficult to find that the release is the product of procedural unconscionability.

An injured party might have an easier time illustrating that the deal is substantively unconscionable but only if the determination of unconscionability is made after the injuries have all come to light.\textsuperscript{271} Yet, the unconscionability doctrine requires that the determination of unconscionability be a determination that the agreement was unconscionable at the time of the formation of the release, not as it later appears with the benefit of hindsight.\textsuperscript{272} Thus, the unconscionability doctrine, if properly applied, will rarely be the basis for a refusal to enforce a personal injury release.

\textsuperscript{267} See supra note 115 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{268} See discussion supra Part I and Section IV.C.

\textsuperscript{269} See, e.g., Hicks v. Sparks, No. 522, 2013, 2014 WL 1233698, at *1 (Del. Mar. 25, 2014) (explaining the automobile collision occurred in March and the release was signed in October. The releasee initially offered Hicks $2000. Hicks countered with $7000. The releasee then offered $2500. Hicks countered with $5000. The releasee then offered $3000. Hicks reiterated a demand of $5000. The releasee then offered $4000 which Hicks accepted); see also Witt v. Watkins, 579 P.2d 1065, 1066–67 (Alaska 1978) (noting release signed seven months after automobile collision and after negotiation).

\textsuperscript{270} See, e.g., Witt, 579 P.2d at 1067 (noting attorney consulted); Simmons v. Blauw, 635 N.E.2d 601, 603 (Ill. App. Ct. 1994) (noting attorney negotiated on her behalf).

\textsuperscript{271} See Kelly v. Widner, 771 P.2d 142, 145 (Mont. 1989). The Kelly court found that the lower court should not have granted summary judgment for the released party because the injured party had raised a question of material fact as to whether the release was unconscionable—that is, “whether under all the circumstances, justice was done.” Id. at 146. The court noted the injured party was in dire financial straits, that she lacked education, that she lacked legal advice, that her living arrangements were isolating, that “there was substantial uncertainty as to the extent of injury . . . and the future prognosis,” and that the settlement had occurred in a hasty fashion. Id. at 145. In so doing the court strayed from traditional unconscionability jurisprudence by noting that “facts subsequent to a settlement may be considered in determining unconscionability.” Id. at 146.

\textsuperscript{272} See James v. Nat’l Fin. LLC., 132 A.3d 799, 814 (Del. Ch. 2016) (“Whether a contract is unconscionable is determined at the time it was made.”); see also Doctor’s Assoc’s. v. Jabusch, 89 F.3d 109, 113 (2d Cir. 1996); Clift v. RDP Co., 200 F. Supp. 3d 660, 677 (W.D. Ky. 2016); U.C.C. § 2-302 (AM. LAW INST. & UNIF. LAW COMM’N 2017) (“unconscionable at the time it was made.”); RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS § 208 (AM. LAW INST. 1981) (“unconscionable at the time the contract is made.”).
VIII. ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE: INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS OF WHETHER THE RELEASOR SIGNED THE RELEASE KNOWINGLY AND VOLUNTARILY: A PROCESS ANALYSIS

If, after a thoughtful consideration of all policy arguments involved, a court is of the opinion that personal injury releasors should, categorically, receive more deference than traditional contract law provides, the better approach, as compared to the current situation, is for courts to forthrightly create a release review doctrine apart from traditional common law contract principles. Such an approach makes clear that personal injury releases are subject to special treatment and the justification for such treatment can be clearly stated and understood. In addition, traditional doctrine would no longer suffer the indignity of being twisted into something far different from its traditional profile.273 In creating such a release review doctrine, courts should not create a paternalistic substantive fairness review, but rather courts should respect the autonomy of the parties by using a review focused on process.

The federal approach to releases of certain federal rights is an example of such a stand-alone release review doctrine. When a court reviews the validity and enforceability of a release of certain federal rights, that court must ensure that the releasor entered into the agreement knowingly and voluntarily.274 In so doing, the courts consider the totality of circumstances.275 Courts have created lists of factors to guide the totality of circumstances analysis of the process resulting in the release being signed.276 A good example of this approach is that of the Eleventh Circuit, which has identified the following factors as objective evidence to consider:

1. the releasor’s education and business experience;
2. the amount of time the releasor had to review the agreement before signing it;
3. “the clarity of the agreement;”
4. the releasor’s opportunity to be advised by an attorney;
5. the other party’s encouragement or discouragement of consultation with an attorney; and
6. “the consideration given in exchange for the waiver when compared with the benefits to which the employee was already entitled.”277

273 See discussion supra Section IV.B.
274 Alexander v. Gardner-Denver Co., 415 U.S. 36, 52 n.15 (1974) (regarding a Title VII matter; “a court would have to determine at the outset that the employee's consent to the settlement was voluntary and knowing.”). See Pierce v. Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co., 65 F.3d 562, 570 (7th Cir. 1995) (regarding ADEA matter; “knowingly and voluntarily.”).
275 See, e.g., Myricks v. Fed. Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 480 F.3d 1036, 1040 (11th Cir. 2007); Melanson v. Browning-Ferris Indus., 281 F.3d 272, 274 (1st Cir. 2002).
276 See, e.g., Cuchara v. Gai-Tronics Corp., 129 Fed. App’x 728, 731 (3d Cir. 2005); Pierce, 65 F.3d at 571.
277 See Myricks, 480 F.3d at 1040; see also Puentes v. United Parcel Serv., Inc., 86 F.3d 196, 198 (11th Cir. 1996).
Other jurisdictions use slightly different factors. In discussing the non-exclusive factors used by the Seventh Circuit, the court in Pierce v. Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company acknowledged that the court was providing a system of evaluation of a release that can include evidence extrinsic to an unambiguous writing, but limited that evidence to objective evidence from disinterested third parties, not a party’s subjective, possibly self-serving testimony. The Pierce court justified its approach of special scrutiny of releases, even those facially unambiguous, as appropriate to support “the strong congressional purpose underlying the ADEA to eradicate discrimination in employment.” Thus, releases of federal rights are not only subject to review on any traditional contract basis such as duress or fraud or mistake, but also such releases are governed by the idiosyncratic knowing and voluntary requirement implemented with the totality of circumstances analysis. That special treatment is clearly and tightly tied to a significant public policy and is done in recognition of other policies at play such as the policy in favor of settlement, even settlement of disputes regarding federally-prohibited discrimination.

278 For example, in Pierce v. Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co., the court established the approach for the Seventh Circuit. Pierce, 65 F.3d at 571. The court, reviewing a release of an employee’s age and racial discrimination claims under the ADEA, provided the following list of non-exclusive factors to consider when determining whether the release was entered into knowingly and voluntarily:

1. the employee’s education and business experience;
2. the employee’s input in negotiating the terms of the settlement;
3. the clarity of the agreement;
4. the amount of time the employee had for deliberation before signing the release;
5. whether the employee actually read the release and considered its terms before signing it;
6. whether the employee was represented by counsel or consulted with an attorney;
7. whether the consideration given in exchange for the waiver exceeded the benefits to which the employee was already entitled by contract or law; and
8. whether the employee’s release was induced by improper conduct on the defendant’s part.

Id. (citation omitted). Contrary to the Seventh Circuit approach, other courts do not include whether the releasor read the release as a factor. These courts apparently hold the more traditional view that a party signing a document has the obligation to read it. For example, in Russell v. Harman Int’l Indus., the court reviewed a release of ERISA claims. Russell v. Harman Int’l Indus., 945 F. Supp. 2d 68, 74 (D.D.C. 2013). The Russell court found the release to be knowing and voluntary and noted that the releasor who signs a document without reading it is held to that document. Id. at 75. See Gaub v. Prof’l Hosp. Supply, Inc., 845 F. Supp. 2d 1118, 1130 (D. Idaho 2012) (reasoning the court would not accept a failure to read as a factor).

279 Pierce, 65 F.3d at 568.

280 Id. at 571 (ADEA is the acronym for the Age Discrimination in Employment Act). See Coventry v. U.S. Steel Corp., 856 F.2d 514, 522–23 (3d Cir. 1988) (“In light of the strong policy concerns to eradicate discrimination in employment, a review of the totality of the circumstances, considerate of the particular individual who has executed the release, is also necessary.”).


282 See, e.g., Stroman v. W. Coast Grocery Co., 884 F.2d 458, 460–61 (9th Cir.1989) (“A general release of Title VII claims does not ordinarily violate public policy. To the contrary,
One factor that has received particular emphasis in the federal analysis is the assistance of an attorney. Courts have stated that if the releasor had the benefit of the advice of counsel regarding the release and if the release is unambiguous by its own terms, a presumption arises the release is valid and enforceable. While the result of such a presumption and thus the result of the totality of the circumstances analysis may then be a conclusion that the releasor knowingly and voluntarily entered into the agreement such that the party has released important federal rights, courts have recognized that they should not attempt to subvert traditional principles and interpret subjective intent. Rather, the releasor must be left to the deal the releasor formed—supplemented by a possible malpractice action against the lawyer. Even in a situation in which the releasor chooses not to consult with counsel, that choice can be powerful, especially if the other party suggested consulting counsel would be helpful.

Courts who, after carefully evaluating the competing policies, conclude that personal injury releasors should receive more favorable treatment than parties to other agreements might turn to a similar knowing and voluntary analysis. Such an approach would allow for a careful review of the process surrounding the signing of a release. A court using such an approach could consider such process factors as the education and experience of the releasor, whether the releasor had ample opportunity to review the release, whether the releasor enjoyed the assistance of counsel, whether the releasor was discouraged or encouraged to consult with counsel, and whether the release was clear or confusingly complex. This sort of analytical framework would allow the court to come to a principled decision as to whether the release should be enforced and should create an environment in which a court might be less likely to be swayed by a releasor’s subjective, hindsight statements that he or she did not intend to enter into the deal spelled out by the release itself. A framework that explicitly considers such factors as the clarity of the writing and whether the releasor was represented forces a focus on what an extraordinary move it is to set such a release aside.

283 See, e.g., Myricks v. Fed. Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 480 F.3d 1036, 1041 (11th Cir. 2007) ("[A]n employee's decision to consult an attorney before signing a clear release creates a presumption that the release is enforceable."); Riley v. Am. Family Mut. Ins. Co., 881 F.2d 368, 373 (7th Cir. 1989) ("[A] plaintiff who executes a release within the context of a settlement pursuant to the advice of independent counsel is presumed to have executed the document knowingly and voluntarily absent claims of fraud or duress.").

284 See, e.g., Cuchara v. Gai-Tronics Corp., 129 Fed. App’x 728, 731 (3d Cir. 2005) (finding it “particularly significant” that Cuchara was repeatedly advised in writing to obtain the services of counsel).
CONCLUSION

Many courts long have treated personal injury releases differently from other contracts when releasors have sought to avoid the effect of the releases. These courts have striven to provide more favorable treatment to personal injury releasors by modifying contract mistake doctrine to make it possible for the doctrine to apply in situations in which it otherwise would not apply. In addition, contrary to what is true with typical written agreements, some courts have not given the traditional respect to the writing when the writing is a personal injury release that the releasor seeks to avoid. Thus, these releasor-friendly approaches have found legally-cognizable mistakes and have failed to recognize any assumption of the risk by the releasor as a result of the releasor’s conscious ignorance or by the express words of the release.

Courts should no longer provide special treatment for personal injury releasors. The releases should be enforced unless a recognized contract avoidance doctrine, traditionally applied, dictates otherwise. The policies behind more favorable treatment of personal injury releasors are particularly suspect in the twenty-first century world. In addition, idiosyncratic modifications to traditional contract doctrines done in the name of this special treatment may do broader violence to those doctrines and to the policies underlying contract enforcement generally and settlement agreements in particular.

While the typical personal injury releasor cannot successfully claim mistake, other contract doctrines may provide assistance if the facts of the situation at hand fit the doctrine. The unconscionability doctrine traditionally has not been used but should be considered along with the other avoidance doctrines that may be claimed, such as fraud and duress. If a release was unconscionable when the agreement was formed, the unconscionability doctrine provides an avenue of relief from the release.

And if a court, after careful consideration, believes the personal injury release situation deserves more scrutiny, perhaps a process analysis focusing on whether the release was knowingly and voluntarily made, patterned after the analysis used with releases of certain federal rights, would be a superior alternative to an analysis that lacks a workable framework of analysis and thus opens the door to ad hoc hindsight judgments by courts as to the fairness of the deal struck by the parties. Such a process analysis would provide added protection to the release setting while at the same time preventing the damage to contract doctrine generally that may occur when that doctrine is bent and applied idiosyncratically to provide special treatment to personal injury releases.