

**CERTIFIED FOR PUBLICATION**

IN THE COURT OF APPEAL OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

SIXTH APPELLATE DISTRICT

NANCY CEJA et al.,

Plaintiffs and Appellants,

v.

RUDOLPH & SLETTEN, INC.,

Defendant and Respondent;

PHOENIX CEJA et al.,

Respondent.

H034826

(Santa Clara County  
Super. Ct. Nos. CV112520 &  
CV115283)

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Nancy and Robert Ceja were married by the pastor of a Pentecostal church in a big wedding ceremony attended by many guests. Four years later, Robert Ceja was killed in an accident at work. Nancy Ceja sued his employer for wrongful death. However, before filing the action, she learned that her marriage was void because the wedding had taken place a few months before Robert Ceja's divorce from his first wife became final. Consequently, to establish her standing to sue, Nancy Ceja alleged that she was a "putative spouse" under Code of Civil Procedure section 377.60, which defines a putative spouse as party to a void or voidable marriage who is found by the court to have "believed in good faith that the marriage . . . was valid."<sup>1</sup> (§ 377.60, subd. (b).)

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<sup>1</sup> Section 377.60 provides, in relevant part, as follows. "A cause of action for the death of a person caused by the wrongful act or neglect of another may be asserted by

The employer moved for summary judgment claiming that Nancy Ceja did not qualify as a putative spouse. The trial court agreed and granted summary judgment. Applying an objective test for putative status, the court found that it was not objectively reasonable for Nancy Ceja to have believed that her marriage was valid.

We conclude that the court applied the wrong test. Section 377.69 requires only that an alleged putative spouse “believed in good faith” that the marriage was valid. We hold that this language does not establish an objective standard; rather it refers to the alleged putative spouse’s state of mind and asks whether that person actually believed the marriage was valid and whether he or she held that belief honestly, genuinely, and sincerely, without collusion or fraud. In so holding, we disagree with *In re Marriage of Vryonis* (1988) 202 Cal.App.3d 712 (*Vryonis*), which held that the statutory language incorporates an objective test.

It follows from our holding that the issue before the trial court on summary judgment was *not* whether there were triable issues of fact concerning whether Nancy Ceja’s belief was objectively reasonable. The issue was whether there were triable issues concerning whether Nancy Ceja harbored a good faith belief. Because the record before us reveals a number of disputed facts necessary to resolve that issue, we reverse.

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any of the following persons or by the decedent’s personal representative on their behalf: [¶] (a) The decedent’s surviving spouse . . . . [¶] (b) Whether or not qualified under subdivision (a), if they were dependent on the decedent, the putative spouse . . . . As used in this subdivision, ‘putative spouse’ means the surviving spouse of a void or voidable marriage who is found by the court to have believed in good faith that the marriage to the decedent was valid.”

All further unspecified statutory references are to the Code of Civil Procedure.

## II. STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Plaintiff Nancy Ceja appeals from a judgment entered after the trial court granted defendant Rudolph & Sletten, Inc.'s motion for summary judgment.<sup>2</sup> She claims the trial court erred in granting the motion on the ground that she lacked standing to sue as a putative spouse. We agree that the court erred and reverse the judgment.

## II. FACTUAL BACKGROUND<sup>3</sup>

In 1995, Robert married Christine. During their marriage, they had two children. Robert and Christine separated, but they shared custody of the children. In 1999, Robert met Nancy. He told her he was married but separated. In 2001, they started living together, and Robert filed for divorce. During this time, Nancy and Christine saw each other at events involving the children.

On September 24, 2003, Robert and Nancy obtained a marriage license. The form contained areas for personal information, including whether the parties had been married before; how many times; when the marriages ended; and how they ended. Robert and Nancy each put zero for the number of prior marriages. Robert and Nancy signed the form, which included a preprinted declaration that they were “an unmarried man and unmarried woman” and that the information provided was “true to the best of [their] knowledge.”

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<sup>2</sup> In a second amended complaint, Nancy Ceja added Jose Delgadillo as a plaintiff. He too worked for defendant and was injured in the same accident. The trial court denied defendant's motion for summary judgment against Delgadillo.

We further note that Christine Ceja, Robert Ceja's first wife, filed a separate wrongful death action against defendant on behalf of their children.

<sup>3</sup> Because Robert Ceja, Christine Ceja, and Nancy Ceja share the same surname, we use their first names for convenience and clarity and intend no disrespect. (See, e.g., *Blache v. Blache* (1945) 69 Cal.App.2d 616, 618 (*Blache*); *In re Marriage of Schaffer* (1999) 69 Cal.App.4th 801, 803, fn. 2.).

On September 27, 2003, Nancy and Robert were married in a ceremony in San Juan Bautista performed by Andy Salinas, the pastor of a Pentecostal church. According to Nancy, over 250 people attended. Thereafter, Nancy and Robert lived together as husband and wife until his death in 2007.

On November 23, 2003, Robert signed a declaration in support of his petition for dissolution, asserting, among other things, that he and Christine had entered a stipulated judgment concerning property rights. On December 26, 2003, a judgment of dissolution of marriage was entered, and notice was sent to him. The notice warned against marrying before the judgment of dissolution was filed. In 2004, Nancy forwarded copies of Robert's divorce papers to his union so that she could be added to his insurance.

On September 19, 2007, Robert was killed in an accident at work.

### **III. THE MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT AND COURT'S RULING**

In moving for summary judgment, defendant claimed that the evidence conclusively negated Nancy's alleged putative status. Defendant noted that (1) they were married before his divorce became final, and therefore, the marriage was bigamous and void (Fam. Code, § 2201, subd. (b) [a bigamous marriage is void or voidable]); (2) before their marriage, Nancy knew that Robert had been married to Christine; (3) both of them signed a marriage license in which Robert falsely represented that he had not been married before; and (4) after the marriage, Nancy sent Robert's divorce papers to the union. Defendant argued that it was not objectively reasonable for Nancy to believe her marriage was valid, that is, a reasonable person, knowing these facts, could not believe in good faith in the validity of the marriage.

In opposition, Nancy declared that she knew Robert had been married to Christine. However, they had separated, and in 2001, she understood that Robert had filed for divorce. She did not know what happened after that because he refused to discuss the subject. Nancy further declared that she did not read the marriage license closely before

signing it. Nor did she read Robert's divorce papers closely before forwarding them to his union.

In addition, Nancy declared that after their marriage, she and Robert wore wedding rings, they lived together as husband and wife, they told people they were married, they filed taxes as a married couple, and they shared a bank account. She also adopted Robert's surname. Nancy stated that she always believed their marriage was valid. She averred that if she had doubted its validity before the wedding, she would have postponed it; and after the wedding, if she had discovered the problem, they would have simply gotten remarried.

As noted, the court granted defendant's motion. Relying on *Welch v. State of California* (2000) 83 Cal.App.4th 1374 (*Welch*) and *Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d 712, the court found that Nancy could not qualify as a putative spouse because a belief in the validity of her marriage was not objectively reasonable. Thus, since Nancy lacked standing to sue as a putative spouse, defendant was entitled to judgment.

#### **IV. STANDARD OF REVIEW**

Summary judgment is granted when a moving party establishes the right to entry of judgment as a matter of law. (§ 437c, subd. (c).) "The purpose of the law of summary judgment is to provide courts with a mechanism to cut through the parties' pleadings in order to determine whether, despite their allegations, trial is in fact necessary to resolve their dispute." (*Aguilar v. Atlantic Richfield Co.* (2001) 25 Cal.4th 826, 843.)

Summary judgment is a drastic procedure, however, and should be used cautiously so that it is not a substitute for a trial on the merits as a means of determining the facts. (*Palma v. U.S. Industrial Fasteners, Inc.* (1984) 36 Cal.3d 171, 183.) "Upon a motion in summary judgment, the controlling question before the trial court is whether there is a material issue of fact to be tried. If the trial court determines there is one, it is powerless to proceed further. The issue must be decided in trial by the finder of fact." (*Haskell v.*

*Carli* (1987) 195 Cal.App.3d 124, 132; see also *Brown v. Bleiberg* (1982) 32 Cal.3d 426, 436, fn. 7.) On appeal from a summary judgment, an appellate court “review[s] the record de novo, considering all the evidence set forth in the moving and opposition papers except that to which objections have been made and sustained.” (*Guz v. Bechtel National, Inc.* (2000) 24 Cal.4th 317, 334.)

## VI. THE PUTATIVE SPOUSE DOCTRINE

To explain our analysis and conclusion concerning the standard for determining putative status, we consider it helpful to review the origin and development of the putative spouse doctrine (the doctrine).

In California, the doctrine first arose as a judicially recognized equitable corollary of the community property system, which California inherited from Spanish civil law and formally adopted by statute in 1850. (See Comment, *Husband and Wife: Rights of Bigamous Wife in Community Property* (1920-1921) 9 Cal. L.Rev. 68, 68-71; Comment, *Domestic Relations: Rights and remedies of the Putative Spouse* (1949) 37 Cal. Law.Rev. 671, 672; Rajan, *The Putative Spouse in California Law* (2000) 11 J. Contemp. Legal Issues 95, 97; Carlson, *Putative Spouses in Texas Courts* (2000) 7 Tex. Wesleyan L.Rev. 1, 3-4 [discussing origin of the doctrine in Spanish law]; 11 Witkin, Summary of California Law (10th ed. 2005) Community Property, § 1, p. 529.)

The community property system rests on the concept that marriage is a partnership, and the property and earnings acquired during a valid marriage are the property of both partners in equal shares. (*Packard v. Arellanes* (1861) 17 Cal. 525, 537; *In re Marriage of Bonds* (2000) 24 Cal.4th 1, 12.) The putative spouse doctrine extends this partnership concept to innocent parties of an invalid marriage. Thus, in *Vallera v. Vallera* (1943) 21 Cal.2d 681 (*Vallera*), the Supreme Court considered it “well settled that a woman who lives with a man as his wife in the belief that a valid marriage exists, is entitled upon termination of their relationship to share in the property acquired by them

during its existence.” (*Id.* at p. 683.) The purpose of the doctrine is to protect the expectations of innocent parties and achieve results that are equitable, fair, and just. (*Coats v. Coats* (1911) 160 Cal. 671, 675; *Schneider v. Schneider* (1920) 183 Cal. 335, 336-338 (*Schneider*); *Caldwell v. Odisio* (1956) 142 Cal.App.2d 732, 736.)<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine is typically applied to distribute quasi-marital property at the end of a putative marriage. The doctrine has also been recognized in a number of related contexts, for example, in determining (1) the interest of a putative spouse in a decedent’s property (*Feig v. Bank of Italy etc. Ass’n.* (1933) 218 Cal. 54); (2) the right to statutory benefits upon the death of a police officer (*Adduddell v. Board of Administration* (1970) 8 Cal.App.3d 243); and (3) the applicability of the rule of imputed contributory negligence applied (*Caldwell v. Odisio, supra*, 142 Cal.App.2d 732). The doctrine has also expanded beyond putative spouses to putative domestic partners. (*In re Domestic Partnership of Ellis* (2008) 162 Cal.App.4th 1000; but see *Velez v. Smith* (2006) 142 Cal.App.4th 1154, 1172-1174 [doctrine not applicable to domestic partnership law].)

### ***Codification of the Judicial Doctrine***

In 1969, the Legislature codified the doctrine in former Civil Code section 4452, which was then part of the new, now former, Family Law Act. (Former Civ. Code § 4400 et seq.; Stats. 1969, ch. 1608, § 8, p. 3314.) That section provided, in relevant

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<sup>4</sup> In *Coats v. Coats, supra*, 160 Cal. 671, the court opined, “To say that the woman in such case, even though she may be penniless and unable to earn a living, is to receive nothing, while the man with whom she lived and labored in the belief that she was his wife shall take and hold whatever he and she have acquired, would be contrary to the most elementary conceptions of fairness and justice.” (*Id.* at p. 675; see *Jackson v. Jackson* (1892) 94 Cal. 446, 463-464 (conc. opn. Harrison, J.) [recognizing “equitable grounds” to divide property between spouses upon annulment of marriage].)

In contrast, common law jurisdictions apply the rule that a party to a void or voidable marriage gains no rights to property acquired during the “marriage.” (See *Schneider, supra*, 183 Cal. at pp. 337-339 [discussing difference between common law and community property jurisdictions]; *DeFrance v. Johnson* (1886) 26 Fed. 891, 894 [applying common law rule].)

part, “Whenever a determination is made that a marriage is void or voidable and the court finds that either party or both parties believed in good faith that the marriage was valid, the court shall declare such party or parties to have the status of a putative spouse . . . .” (See Stats. 1969, ch. 1608, § 8, pp. 3322-3323.) This particular provision authorized the equal distribution of property acquired during the putative marriage. (Former Civ. Code, §§ 4452, 4455, 4800; see *In re Marriage of Monti* (1982) 135 Cal.App.3d 50, 54-55 (*Monti*) [discussing adoption of the former Family Law Act]; Luther & Luther, *Support and Property Rights of the Putative Spouse* (1973) 24 Hastings L.J. 311, 311-319.) In codifying the doctrine, the Legislature simply adopted existing case law and did not intend to change the definition of a putative spouse or restrict application of the doctrine. (*Monti, supra*, 135 Cal.App.3d at p. 55; *Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 719 [codification “was merely declaratory of existing law and not intended to work significant substantive changes”]; see *In re Marriage of Xia Guo and Xiao Hua Sun* (2010) 186 Cal.App.4th 1491, 1500 [purpose of codification was same as equitable purpose of the judicially created doctrine]; see also, *County of Los Angeles v. Frisbie* (1942) 19 Cal.2d 634, 644 [intent to overthrow “long-established principles of law” not presumed from new enactments unless such a legislative intent is expressed or necessarily implied].)

In 1992, the Legislature repealed the former Family Law Act and enacted the Family Code, in which section 2251 reiterates the former Family Law Act provision concerning putative spouses. (Stats. 1992, ch. 162, §§ 3 & 10, p. 464.)

In 1975, the Legislature codified the doctrine again when it amended the wrongful death statute, former section 377. (Stats. 1975, ch. 334, §2, p. 784; ch. 1241, § 5.5, p. 3190; compare with Stats. 1968, ch. 766, §1, p. 1488 [no reference to putative spouses].) Among other things, the amendment added the previously codified definition of putative spouse and added putative spouses to the list of those with standing to sue.



Here too, the amendment did not change the doctrine or even the scope of the statute; it merely conformed the statute to existing case law holding that a putative spouse had standing to sue.<sup>5</sup> (See *Kunakoff v. Woods* (1958) 166 Cal.App.2d 59, 63-68 [under former § 377, “heirs” had standing, and putative spouses qualified as heirs].) In 1992, the Legislature repealed former section 377 and reenacted its content as section 377.60. (Stats. 1992, ch. 178, §§ 19-20, p. 893.)<sup>6</sup>

### ***The State of the Doctrine when Codified***

We now turn to a number of cases that show how the doctrine was applied at the time it was codified, that is, cases that reveal what was required to establish putative status and how courts determined it.

In *Schneider, supra*, 183 Cal. 335, a woman remarried, erroneously thinking her first marriage had been dissolved after some unspecified judicial hearing. The court believed her version of what had happened and implicitly found that she had remarried in good faith and thus qualified for putative status. The court did not discuss the nature of the prior judicial proceeding or whether it provided a reasonable basis to believe that the first marriage had been dissolved. (See *Macchi v. La Rocha* (1921) 54 Cal.App. 98 [putative status where parties obtained a marriage license but never solemnized the

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<sup>5</sup> The primary purpose of the 1975 amendment was to overrule the holding in *Steed v. Imperial Airlines* (1974) 12 Cal.3d 115, where the court held that former section 377 did not authorize unadopted stepchildren to sue for the wrongful death of stepparents. (See Stats. 1975, ch 334, §2, p. 784 [uncodified section stating intent to overrule *Steed*].)

<sup>6</sup> In an uncodified section of the Family Code, the Legislature declared, “A provision of this code, insofar as it is substantially the same as a previously existing provision relating to the same subject matter, shall be considered a restatement and continuation thereof and not as a new enactment.” (Stats. 1992, ch. 162, § 10, p. 464.)

The Legislature has also recognized putative spouse status in a number of other statutes. (§ 872.210 [relating to partition actions]; Fam. Code, §§ 17505 and 17506 [relating to the enforcement of child support orders and location of parents]; and Pen. Code § 3524 [granting putative spouses standing to sue for the wrongful death of a prisoner].)

marriage because they thought the license was enough]; *Santos v. Santos* (1939) 32 Cal.App.2d 62 [same].)

In *Figoni v. Figoni* (1931) 211 Cal. 354, a niece sought to have the marriage to her uncle declared void. In granting her putative status, the court found that neither party knew that such marriages between uncles and nieces had been prohibited since 1872. (See former Civ. Code, § 59; *People v. Baker* (1968) 69 Cal.2d 44, 46 [prohibition enacted in 1872].) Because there was substantial evidence to support the trial court's finding, the Supreme Court affirmed without discussing whether it was reasonable to believe that such an incestuous marriage was valid.

On the other hand, in *Flanagan v. Capital Nat. Bank of Sacramento* (1931) 213 Cal. 664, the court denied a woman putative status. It found that she had not genuinely believed her marriage was valid. The record revealed that the couple had not obtained a license or had a ceremony. Moreover, the woman testified that her putative husband had told her they did not need a license because they could get along “ ‘as good as any couple that is married and better.’ ” (*Id.* at p. 666.) The court opined, “It would be difficult to believe that even an inexperienced foreigner, unacquainted with the laws and customs of this country, would consider that by this arrangement she had contracted a valid marriage. But plaintiff was not inexperienced. She had lived all her life in California, and had been previously legally married and divorced. Everything in the record suggests that she viewed the relationship not as a marriage, but as a satisfactory substitute for a marriage.” (*Ibid.*; see *Miller v. Johnson* (1963) 214 Cal.App.2d 123 [no honest belief where parties obtained no license, they secured Mexican divorce and fake divorce decree under suspicious circumstances, they gave inconsistent testimony about the decree, and they had a perfunctory marriage ceremony].)

In *Vallera, supra*, 21 Cal.2d 681, the court denied putative status to a woman who had lived with a man for several years. She said she thought they had entered into valid

common law marriage in Michigan. However, the court found that she had not genuinely believed the marriage was valid. There had been no ceremony, there was no evidence of a common law marriage, and she actually knew that her putative husband was still married and legally unable to remarry.

In *Estate of Krone* (1948) 83 Cal.App.2d 766, a woman obtained an interlocutory divorce decree and remarried someone else 10 months later, unaware that she was required to wait one year. Later her divorce became final. She thought the marriage was valid, and when he died, she sought a determination of her rights. The court found that she had married in good faith. The court did not discuss whether it was reasonable for her to think her marriage was valid after she received notice that her divorce was final. (See *Sanguinetti v. Sanguinetti* (1937) 9 Cal.2d 95 (*Sanguinetti*) [putative status where woman believed marriage between interlocutory and final divorce decree was valid.]; *Estate of Foy* (1952) 109 Cal.App.2d 329 [same].)

In *In re Goldberg's Estate* (1962) 203 Cal.App.2d 402 (*Goldberg's Estate*), around 1943, a man told a woman he had separated from his first wife and was getting divorced. This was in 1943. They never discussed the subject again. The woman had been married twice before and divorced once, and she thought her second marriage had been annulled, although there was no documentary evidence of it. In March 1944, the two were married in Mexico in a ceremony performed in Spanish. Thereafter, they lived as husband and wife. In July 1944, there was an interlocutory divorce decree, and the man's divorce became final in July 1945. The woman testified that all the documents concerning marriages and divorces had been stolen during a trip to Alaska. The trial court found that the woman had married the man believing in good faith that both were eligible to marry. (*Id.* at pp. 404-405, 411.)

On appeal, the reviewing court observed that there was substantial evidence undermining the woman's claim that she thought her marriage was valid. The court

noted, however, that the trial court had observed her testify and believed her testimony that she thought her marriage had been annulled and his marriage had been dissolved. The court opined, “If [the woman] believed in good faith that a valid marriage existed, then in law she was a putative spouse. [Citation.] The belief held at the time of the alleged marriage is the determining factor . . . .” (*Goldberg’s Estate, supra*, 203 Cal.App.2d at pp. 411-412.) The court further explained that although the woman’s testimony was pretty “weak,” “the testimony of a party to the action, if believed, is sufficient to support the judgment of a trial court even though contradicted by a great deal of contrary evidence. [Citation.] Whether or not the required belief was held in good faith by [the woman] *was a question of fact* to be resolved by the trial court. [Citation.]” (*Id.* at p. 412, italics added.) In this regard, the court opined that the conduct of their parties after their marriage and for the next 16 years supported the trial court’s finding of a good faith belief. (*Ibid.*; see *Partrick v. Partrick* (1952) 112 Cal.App.2d 107 [where evidence concerning good faith belief is in conflict, reviewing court bound by trial court’s finding].)

As these cases reveal, when the putative spouse doctrine was codified, courts treated putative status as a factual question concerning a party’s state of mind: did he or she honestly and genuinely believe that the marriage was valid. The answer hinged in large part on the credibility of the alleged putative spouse. And in determining credibility, courts also considered the circumstances surrounding the putative marriage and the person’s level of education, marital experience, intelligence, and even the conduct after the putative marriage. If the trial court found that a party harbored a good faith belief, and if there was substantial evidence to support it, the reviewing court upheld the finding of putative status.

For many years after codification, courts understood and applied the doctrine in this way.

For example, in *Neureither v. Workmen's Comp. App. Bd.* (1971) 15 Cal.App.3d 429 (*Neureither*), a referee disbelieved a woman who said she thought her prior marriage had been dissolved and denied her benefits as a putative spouse. Citing *Goldberg*, the reviewing court observed that it was bound by the trial court's factual determination of putative status when it was supported by substantial evidence.

In *Estate of Vargas* (1974) 36 Cal.App.3d 714, a man married a woman in 1929, and they raised a family. In 1942, while still married, the man married another woman, falsely assuring her that he was divorced. They too raised a family, although at one point he stopped spending nights with them. The trial court found that the second wife believed in good faith that her marriage was valid. In affirming, the court noted that her testimony "was not inherently improbable," "her credibility was a question for determination by the trial court," and its "acceptance of her testimony established her status as a putative spouse." (*Id.* at p. 717.)

In *Wagner v. County of Imperial* (1983) 145 Cal.App.3d 980 (*Wagner*), a particularly pertinent case, a couple, Sharon and Clifton, exchanged personal marriage vows, Sharon used Clifton's name, they held themselves out as husband and wife, and they had a child. When Clifton was killed in a car accident, Sharon sued for wrongful death under former section 377, alleging that she was a putative spouse. Although the trial court found that she harbored a good faith belief in the validity of her common law marriage, it denied her standing because her putative marriage had not been solemnized.<sup>7</sup> (*Id.* at p. 982.)

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<sup>7</sup> Under Family Code section 300, a valid marriage requires solemnization—i.e., a marriage ceremony performed by a person authorized to perform it. (See Fam. Code, §§ 400-401 [authorized persons].) No particular form of ceremony is required, but the parties must "declare, in the physical presence of the person solemnizing the marriage and necessary witnesses, that they take each other as husband and wife." (Fam. Code, § 420, subd. (a).)

On appeal, the court reversed. The court noted that solemnization had never been a prerequisite for putative status. It further observed that the statutory definition of a putative spouse did not require solemnization. Rather, to qualify as a putative spouse, “Sharon must only prove she had a good faith belief her marriage to Clifton was valid; solemnization would be at most evidence of such good faith belief. . . . ‘[T]he essence of a putative spouse is a good faith belief in the existence of a valid marriage.’ Here the superior court specifically found Sharon believed in good faith she was validly married to Clifton. The court’s legal conclusion Sharon was not Clifton’s putative spouse is contrary to such express finding of good faith. The court should have held Sharon was Clifton’s putative spouse.” (*Wagner, supra*, 145 Cal.App.3d at p. 983.)

### ***Vryonis and the Requirement of an Objective Standard***

With this understanding of how courts applied the doctrine before and after codification, we turn to *Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d 712, which added a further requirement for putative status: a party’s good faith belief must also be objectively reasonable.<sup>8</sup>

The pertinent facts in *Vryonis* are as follows. A visiting Iranian professor at UCLA named Fereshteh alleged that she was the putative spouse of a resident professor named Speros. She was a Shia Muslim, and he was a nonpracticing member of the Greek Orthodox Church. They went out together, but her religion prohibited dating without a

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<sup>8</sup> Years before *Vryonis*, the Fifth Circuit in *Spearman v. Spearman* (5th Cir.1973) 482 F.2d 1203 upheld the trial court, which had applied an objective test. In finding no error, the Fifth Circuit concluded that an objective test was “perfectly consonant with the California decisions that have developed and applied the ‘putative spouse’ doctrine.” (*Id.* at p. 1207.) The court acknowledged that no court had ever applied such a test but opined that no court that had discussed good faith had rejected or precluded such a test. (*Ibid.*)

*Spearman* is not binding on us, and we do not consider its seems-all-right analysis to be persuasive support for an objective test. (See *People v. Williams* (1997) 16 Cal.4th 153, 190 [decisions of lower federal courts are not binding authority].)

marriage or formal commitment. At Fereshteh's request, Speros agreed to a marriage authorized by her religion. Fereshteh performed the private ceremony in accordance with religious liturgical requirements. Later, she sought to solemnize the marriage in a mosque, but Speros refused. Nevertheless, he assured her that they were married. A couple of years later, however, he announced that he was going to marry another woman. Fereshteh publicly revealed their marriage, but he married the other woman anyway. Fereshteh then sought a determination of her rights as a putative spouse. (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at pp. 715-716.)

The trial court found that Fereshteh had believed in good faith that she was validly married. It noted that Speros had agreed to be married, and they had a proper, albeit private, marriage ceremony authorized by her religion. Speros had also assured Fereshteh that they were married, although he did not think the marriage was valid under California law. Fereshteh was unaware of his views or California's requirements for marriage. (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at pp. 715-716.)

On appeal, the *Vryonis* court rejected the trial court's factual finding of putative status. It held that Fereshteh's good faith belief, no matter credible and sincere, was simply not enough. Her belief had to be tested against an objective standard. It had to be objectively reasonable, that is, it had to rest on facts that would cause a reasonable person to believe the marriage was valid under California law. Noting that Fereshteh had made no effort to comply with California's statutory marriage requirements, the court concluded that a reasonable person would not have believed he or she was validly married after some private religious ceremony. Thus, because Fereshteh's belief was not objectively reasonable, she could not have held it in good faith and was not entitled to putative status. (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at pp. 714, 720-722.)

We first observe that in imposing an objective test for putative status, the *Vryonis* court, in effect, gave appellate courts the opportunity to determine putative status de

novo. As noted, putative status had always rested on the trial court’s factual finding concerning good faith belief, and that finding was upheld if supported by substantial evidence. Whether a good faith belief is objectively reasonable added a purely legal question to the determination of putative status, a question subject to independent review. (Cf. *City of Stockton v. Workers’ Comp. Appeals Bd.* (2006) 135 Cal.App.4th 1513, 1524 [“whether the employee’s belief was objectively reasonable . . . is a question of law that we determine independently”].)

Next we observe that appellate courts, including this court, have adopted *Vryonis*, accepting its objective test without critical analysis of its rationale. Indeed, its objective test has become firmly lodged in the judicial boilerplate describing the putative spouse doctrine. (See, e.g., *Centinela Hospital Medical Center v. Superior Court* (1989) 215 Cal.App.3d 971, 975 (*Centinela Hospital*); *Welch, supra*, 83 Cal.App.4th 1374, 1378; *Estate of DePasse* (2002) 97 Cal.App.4th 92, 107-108; *In re Marriage of Xia Guo and Xiao Hua Sun, supra*, 186 Cal.App.4th 1491, 1497.)

However, the time has come, belatedly, to review the analysis in *Vryonis*, and because we reject it, we shall do so in detail.<sup>9</sup>

In adding an objective test, the *Vryonis* court did not rely on the long history of putative spouse cases or cite cases suggesting that a good faith belief, by itself, was not enough to qualify for putative status. Nor did the court find a legislative intent to establish an objective test in the history of codification of the doctrine. Rather, the source of the test was the court’s simple declaration that a “ ‘[g]ood faith belief’ is a legal term of art, and in both the civil and criminal law a determination of good faith is tested by an objective standard.” (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.2d at p. 720.) In other words, the

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<sup>9</sup> We are not alone in rejecting *Vryonis*. (See Bassett, *California Community Property Law* (2011 ed.) § 2:8, pp. 71-78 [criticizing *Vryonis* and its progeny].)



phrase “good faith belief” necessarily and automatically incorporates an objective standard of reasonableness.

In support, the court quoted excerpts from *Russ Bldg. Partnership v. City and County of San Francisco* (1988) 44 Cal.3d 839 (*Russ Bldg. Partnership*), *Perdue v. Crocker National Bank* (1985) 38 Cal.3d 913 (*Perdue*), *Theodor v. Superior Court* (1972) 8 Cal.3d 77 (*Theodor*), *People v. Ruggles* (1985) 39 Cal.3d 1 (*Ruggles*), and *In re Arias* (1986) 42 Cal.3d 667 (*Arias*).

These excerpts share two qualities. None suggests that “good faith belief” inherently means a belief that is also objectively reasonable; and they are irrelevant in determining what the requirements for putative status are or arguably should be.

From *Russ Bldg. Partnership, supra*, 44 Cal.3d 839, the court quoted this sentence: “A vested right requires more than a good faith subjective belief that one has it.” (*Id.* at p. 853; *Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 720.) In that case, the Supreme Court held that the scope of a developer’s vested right to complete a project depended on a permit condition, and the meaning of the condition posed a legal question of statutory construction. Thus, the developer’s subjective understanding of the condition did not determine the scope of its vested rights.

Viewed in context, the excerpt does not imply that “good faith belief” imports an objective standard of reasonableness. The court did not mention or use that standard to evaluate the developer’s subjective understanding of the permit condition. It simply interpreted the condition under the rules of statutory construction. Thus, it is illogical to assert that because the developer’s subjective understanding of the condition did not determine its vested rights, a good faith belief should not be enough to establish putative status. On the contrary, prior to *Vryonis*, a good faith belief had always been enough. Finally, and ironically, we note that the excerpt does not separate or distinguish “good

faith” from “subjective belief”; rather, it expressly joins the two into a single phrase, implicitly acknowledging that a “good faith belief” can be purely subjective.

From *Perdue, supra*, 38 Cal.3d at page 924, the *Vryonis* court quoted the following passage: “ ‘The recent decision in *Lazar v. Hertz Corp.* (1983) 143 Cal.App.3d 128 offers an analogy to the present litigation. Hertz’ car rental agreement permitted it to determine unilaterally the price charged for gas used to fill the tanks of returned rental cars. Plaintiff’s suit alleged that Hertz fixed unreasonably high prices, in breach of its duty of good faith and fair dealing. Discussing this cause of action, the court said that “[t]he essence of the good faith covenant is objectively reasonable conduct. Under California law, an open term in a contract must be filled in by the party having discretion within the standard of good faith and fair dealing.” [Citation.]’ ” (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 720.)

In *Perdue* (and the *Hertz* case it cited) the issue was whether a contracting party breached the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing.<sup>10</sup> In *Storek & Storek, Inc. v. Citicorp Real Estate, Inc.* (2002) 100 Cal.App.4th 44 (*Storek*), the court explained that on the issue of breach, “the concepts of objective reasonableness and subjective good faith do merge. The Supreme Court has said that the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing has both a subjective and an objective component—*subjective good faith* and objective fair dealing. ‘A party violates the covenant if it subjectively lacks belief in the validity of its act *or* if its conduct is objectively unreasonable.’ [Citation.] ‘[T]he covenant of good faith can be breached for objectively unreasonable conduct, regardless of the actor’s motive.’ [Citations.]” (*Id.* at pp. 61-62, fn. 13, first italics added, quoting

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<sup>10</sup> “In every contract there is an implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing that neither party will do anything which injures the right of the other to receive the benefits of the agreement.” (*Brown v. Superior Court* (1949) 34 Cal.2d 559, 564; accord, *Cates Construction, Inc. v. Talbot Partners* (1999) 21 Cal.4th 28, 43.)

*Carma Developers (Cal.), Inc. v. Marathon Development California, Inc.* (1992) 2 Cal.4th 342, 372-373.)

Viewed in light of this distinction between subjective intent (good faith) and objectively reasonable conduct (fair dealing), the excerpt does not mean that the subjective element of good faith must itself be objectively reasonable. Moreover, unlike the dual aspects of the implied covenant, putative status has always been defined only in terms of a good faith belief. Thus, this excerpt does not, in our view, establish that “good faith belief” incorporates an objective standard. Nor does the excerpt suggest that a good faith belief in the validity of a marriage should be tested against an objective standard of reasonableness.

The *Vryonis* court’s reliance on excerpts from criminal cases is also misplaced. From footnote 13 in *Theodor, supra*, 8 Cal.3d at page 98, the court quoted this passage: “ ‘ “If subjective good faith alone were the test, the protections of the Fourth Amendment would evaporate, and the people would be ‘secure in their persons, house, papers, and effects,’ only in the discretion of the police.” [Citation.] “Good faith . . . is immaterial, and cannot serve to rehabilitate an otherwise defective warrant.” [Citation.]” (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 720.) From *Ruggles, supra*, 39 Cal.3d 1, the court offered this sentence: “ ‘The probable cause determination that will validate a warrantless search of defendant’s vehicle must be based on objective facts that could justify the issuance of a warrant by a magistrate and not merely the subjective good faith of the police officers.’ ” (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 720.) And from *Arias, supra*, 42 Cal.3d at page 696, the court reiterated “ ‘ “[r]easonableness,” of course, is an objective standard, requiring more than good faith.’ ” (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 721.)

In *Theodor, supra*, 8 Cal.3d 77, the Supreme Court decided what types of false or erroneous statements must be excised from a search warrant affidavit before it is tested for probable cause. The court held that if it was reasonable for the affiant to include such

statements, they could be considered; if it was unreasonable, the statements must be disregarded. The court further explained that in evaluating whether it was reasonable to include a particular statement, the affiant's good faith belief that it was accurate is irrelevant. In *Ruggles, supra*, 39 Cal.3d 1, the court held that a police officer's belief that he had probable cause for a search was irrelevant in determining its propriety because probable cause is tested by an objective standard. In *Arias, supra*, 42 Cal.3d 667, the court held that whether Youth Authority officials acted in good faith was irrelevant in determining whether the installation of listening devices in a chapel violated Penal Code section 2600, which prohibits restrictions on the right of religious expression unless the restriction is *reasonably* related to a legitimate penological interest.

Neither the excerpt nor the criminal cases they came from suggest that "good faith belief" incorporates an objective standard. In each of these cases, the objective standard was required by the Fourth Amendment and Penal Code section 2600.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the definition of putative spouse has never required a *reasonable* good faith belief or even used the word "reasonable."

In sum, the *Vryonis* court's declaration that "good faith belief" necessarily incorporates an objective standard of reasonableness lacks any supportive authority. Moreover, even cursory research refutes that notion and reveals that long before *Vryonis*, courts have understood the concepts of good faith and reasonableness to be separate and distinct and, as a consequence, used different tests to evaluate them. (*Mattei v. Hopper*

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<sup>11</sup> The Fourth Amendment provides that "[t]he right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against *unreasonable* searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." (Italics added.)

Penal Code section 2600 provides, in relevant part, "A person sentenced to imprisonment in a state prison may during that period of confinement be deprived of such rights, and only such rights, as is *reasonably* related to legitimate penological interests." (Italics added.)

(1958) 51 Cal.2d 119, 123; *Guntert v. City of Stockton* (1974) 43 Cal.App.3d 203, 210-211 (*Guntert*); *Storek, supra*, 100 Cal.App.4th at p. 59.)

In *People v. Nunn* (1956) 46 Cal.2d 460, the court explained that “[t]he phrase ‘good faith’ in common usage has a well-defined and generally understood meaning, being ordinarily used to describe that *state of mind* denoting honesty of purpose, freedom from intention to defraud, and, generally speaking, means being faithful to one’s duty or obligation.” (*Id.* at p. 468, italics added; see *Cotran v. Rollins Hudig Hall Internat., Inc.* (1998) 17 Cal.4th 93, 106, fn. 3 [good faith is “commonly thought of as subjective in essence”]; *Brown Derby Hollywood Corp. v. Hatton* (1964) 61 Cal.2d 855, 858-860 [good faith belief is a subjective state of mind and can exist even if belief is erroneous]; *Heney v. Sutro & Co.* (1915) 28 Cal.App. 698, 702 [good faith means honestly, without collusion, fraud, knowledge of fraud, or intent assist in unlawful design]; cf. *Smith v. Selma Community Hosp.* (2010) 188 Cal.App.4th 1, 35 [“bad faith” is a subjective standard].)

Reasonableness, on the other hand, refers to an objective quality determined with reference to common experience and generally refers to something that is arrived at logically, enjoys factual support, and is not arbitrary or capricious. (*Guntert, supra*, 43 Cal.App.3d at pp. 203, 210-211; *Storek, supra*, 100 Cal.App.4th at p. 59.)

Thus, when the question is whether a party acted in good faith, the inquiry concerns the party’s subjective state of mind and whether it is genuine and sincere or tainted by fraud, dishonesty, collusion, deceit, and unfaithfulness. Whether a reasonable person would have acted similarly under the same conditions is not relevant to that inquiry. On the other hand, when the question is whether a party acted reasonably, the inquiry *is* whether a reasonable person under the similar circumstances would have acted in the same way. In this context, whether the party acted in good faith is not relevant.

Both civil and criminal cases reflect the distinction between good faith and reasonableness and the difference in how each is determined.

In *Knight v. City of Capitola* (1992) 4 Cal.App.4th 918 (*Knight*) (disapproved on other grounds in *Reid v. Google, Inc.* (2010) 50 Cal.4th 512, 532, fn. 7), this court reviewed an award of costs to the defendant under section 1038, which permits such recovery when a proceeding under the Tort Claims Act is not brought “with reasonable cause and a good faith belief that there was a justifiable controversy.” (§ 1038, subd. (a).) We explained that “[g]ood faith, or its absence, involves a factual inquiry into the plaintiff’s subjective state of mind [citations]: Did he or she believe the action was valid? What was his or her intent or purpose in pursuing it? A subjective state of mind will rarely be susceptible of direct proof; usually the trial court will be required to infer it from circumstantial evidence. Because the good faith issue is factual, the question on appeal will be whether the evidence of record was sufficient to sustain the trial court’s finding.” (*Id.* at p. 932.) On the other hand, “*Reasonable cause* is to be determined objectively, as a matter of law, on the basis of the facts known to the plaintiff when he or she filed or maintained the action. Once what the plaintiff (or his or her attorney) knew has been determined, or found to be undisputed, it is for the court to decide ‘ “whether any reasonable attorney would have thought the claim tenable . . . .” ’ [Citations.] Because the opinion of the hypothetical reasonable attorney is to be determined as a matter of law, reasonable cause is subject to de novo review on appeal.” (*Ibid.*; accord, *Langhorne v. Superior Court* (2009) 179 Cal.App.4th 225, 238-239 [“good faith mistake” under Welf. & Inst. Code, § 6601, subd. (a)(2) posed factual question reviewed on appeal for substantial evidence]; *Alpha Mechanical, Heating & Air Conditioning, Inc. v. Travelers Cas. & Sur. Co. of America* (2005) 133 Cal.App.4th 1319, 1338-1339 [penalty assessments under Bus. & Prof. Code, § 7108.5 and Civil Code, § 3260 based on lack of

a “ ‘good faith’ ” or “ ‘bona fide’ ” dispute involves personal qualities and a factual inquiry into subjective state of mind].)

*Corbett v. Howard Dodge, Inc.* (2004) 119 Cal.App.4th 915 (*Corbett*) is particularly pertinent here. It involved Civil Code section 1780, subdivision (e), which authorizes an award of reasonable attorney fees to a prevailing defendant if the trial court finds that “the plaintiff’s prosecution of the action was not in good faith.” The issue there was whether a subjective or objective test governed the determination of good faith. (*Corbett, supra*, 119 Cal.App.4th at pp. 920-921.) In holding that a subjective test applied, the court pointed out that this subjective test also applied in determining whether to award expenses under section 128.5 that a party incurred because of an opposing party’s “bad-faith actions or tactics that are frivolous or solely intended to cause unnecessary delay.” (§ 128.5, subd. (a); *Corbett, supra*, 119 Cal.App.4th at pp. 921-923.) The court further observed that “good faith” had uniformly been construed to require a subjective test involving a factual inquiry into the actor’s actual state of mind. (*Corbett, supra*, 119 Cal.App.4th at p. 923.)

Criminal cases similarly distinguish the concepts of good faith and reasonableness. For example, it is settled that in certain circumstances, a good faith mistake of fact or law constitutes a defense when it negates the knowledge or specific intent element of a charged offense.<sup>12</sup> (*People v. Russell* (2006) 144 Cal.App.4th 1415, 1425-1427 (*Russell*); see Pen. Code, § 26, subd. Three; e.g., *People v. Eastman* (1888) 77 Cal. 171, 171-172; *People v. Holmes* (1910) 13 Cal.App. 212, 216-217; *People v. Bernhardt* (1963) 222 Cal.App.2d 567, 592.) In such situations, the good faith mistake need not be objectively reasonable, and it is error to instruct jurors that it must be. (*People v. Navarro* (1979) 99

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<sup>12</sup> “ ‘ “A mistake of fact” is where a person understands the facts to be other than they are; whereas a “mistake of law” is where a person knows the facts as they really are, but has a mistaken belief as to the legal consequences of those facts.’ [Citations.]” (*People v. LaMarr* (1942) 20 Cal.2d 705, 710.)

Cal.App.3d Supp. 1, 10; see Bench Notes to CALCRIM No. 3406 (2011) p. 1009 [do not instruct that good faith belief must be reasonable knowledge or specific intent element of offense].)

On the other hand, where the defendant is charged with a general intent crime or where consent is a defense to a sexual offense, a good faith mistake of fact or law or a good faith but mistaken belief in consent constitutes a defense only if it is also objectively reasonable. (See, e.g., *People v. Mayberry* (1975) 15 Cal.3d 143, 155; *People v. Cole* (2007) 156 Cal.App.4th 452, 483; *People v. Noori* (2006) 136 Cal.App.4th 964, 976-977; *People v. Vineberg* (1981) 125 Cal.App.3d 127, 137.)

Similarly, a good faith but mistaken belief in the need to defend oneself or another against imminent danger of great bodily injury will negate the malice element required for a murder conviction and thus can limit a defendant's culpability for an unlawful homicide to voluntary manslaughter. (*People v. Randle* (2005) 35 Cal.4th 987, 996-997, overruled on other grounds in *People v. Sarun Chun* (2009) 45 Cal.4th 1172, 1201; *People v. Blakeley* (2000) 23 Cal.4th 82, 88; *People v. Barton* (1995) 12 Cal.4th 186, 199.) Again, if the mistaken belief is held in good faith, it need not be objectively reasonable to have an exculpatory effect. On the other hand, if one reasonably believes in the need to defend oneself or another against imminent peril, one's conduct is justified and criminal. (See 1 Witkin & Eptstein, California Criminal Law (3d ed. 2000) Defenses, §§ 64, 65, pp. 400-401.)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> We acknowledge that in *People v. Stewart* (1976) 16 Cal.3d 133, the court rejected a proposed mistaken-belief instruction because it did not require a *good faith* belief. (*Id.* at pp. 138-140.) In dicta, the court explained, “ ‘Whether a claim is advanced in good faith does not depend solely upon whether the claimant believes he was acting lawfully; the circumstances must be indicative of good faith.’ [Citations.] For example, the circumstances in a particular case might indicate that although defendant may have ‘believed’ he acted lawfully, he was aware of contrary facts which rendered such a belief wholly unreasonable, and hence in bad faith.” (*Id.* at p. 140.)



Last, we observe that courts and the Legislature consistently demonstrate their understanding that good faith is distinct from reasonableness and does not incorporate an objective standard. For example, when courts intend to require conduct that is both in good faith and objectively reasonable, they do so expressly and unequivocally. (See, e.g., *United States v. Leon* (1984) 468 U.S. 897 [creating exception to the exclusionary rule based on good faith *and* objectively reasonable reliance on warrant]; *People v. Salas* (2006) 37 Cal.4th 967 [recognizing defense to sale of unregistered securities based on reasonable good faith belief that securities were exempt]; *People v. Mayberry, supra*, 15 Cal.3d 143 [recognizing defense to rape based on reasonable and good faith belief that victim consented]; *People v. Hernandez* (1964) 61 Cal.2d 529 [same re statutory rape based on good faith and objectively reasonable belief that victim was not underage]; *People v. Vogel* (1956) 46 Cal.2d 798 [same re defense to bigamy based on reasonable good faith belief in divorce]; *Baker v. American Horticulture Supply, Inc.* (2010) 186 Cal.App.4th 1059 [recognizing defense to willful failure to pay commission based on reasonable good faith belief that claim for commission is invalid].)

Likewise the Legislature uses express, unequivocal language when it intends to require conduct or belief that is both held in good faith and objectively reasonable. (See, e.g., §§ 1985.3, subd. (g) [“a reasonable and good faith attempt”]; 1985.6, subd. (f)(4) [same]; 2023.010, subd. (i) [same]; Civil Code, § 56.36, subd. (d)(1) [same]; Fin. Code,

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We do not read the court’s comment to mean that to qualify as a *good faith* belief, it must be objectively reasonable. In our view, the court was merely explaining that if a person knows facts that refute a rational belief in something and willfully ignores those facts in order to maintain that belief, then that “belief” is not held honestly—i.e., in good faith. (See, e.g., *In re Marriage of Recknor* (1982) 138 Cal.App.3d 539 [party’s knowledge that first marriage had not been dissolved before second marriage precluded finding of putative status]; *People v. Vineberg, supra*, 125 Cal.App.3d 127 [facts known to defendant negate alleged good faith belief]; *Miller v. Johnson, supra*, 214 Cal.App.2d 123 [while still married, plaintiff went to Mexico and went through farcical divorce and marriage procedures]; *People v. Proctor* (1959) 169 Cal.App.2d 269 [known facts negate actual belief].)

§ 50124, subd. (a)(4) [same]; Gov. Code, §§ 11507.7, subd. (a) [same]; 60373, subd. (b) [same]; 68092.5, subd. (c) [same]; Pen. Code, § 278.7 [“with a good faith and reasonable belief”]; Pub. Util. Code, § 588, subd. (b)(1) [“reasonable, good faith belief”]; compare with Fin. Code, § 5204, subd. (b) [requiring only good faith belief]; Gov. Code, § 8547.2 [same].)

In this case, we have found no evidence suggesting that when the Legislature codified the doctrine, it intended to require that an alleged putative spouse’s belief in the validity of a marriage be both held in good faith and objectively reasonable. This is understandable because, as noted, the Legislature intended only to continue the judicial doctrine as it had been understood and applied.

At this point, it is helpful to recap our analysis and discussion. The original judicial definition of a putative spouse required only a good faith belief in the validity of a marriage. The Legislature codified that definition without intending to change it. The *Vryonis* court engrafted an objective test to the statutory definition based on the legally unsupported view that “good faith belief” necessarily incorporates an objective standard. However, good faith and objective reasonableness are separate and distinct concepts, and each is evaluated differently. The determination of good faith belief focuses on a party’s subjective state of mind and evidence of honesty, sincerity, faithfulness, fraud, or collusion and not on whether the belief is objectively reasonable. And when courts and Legislature intend to require conduct or belief that is both held in good faith and objectively reasonable, they do so clearly.

In light of our discussion, we hold that the statutory definition of putative spouse in section 377.60 is clear and unambiguous. It requires a good faith belief in the validity of a marriage. Giving the statutory language its ordinary meaning, we hold that the phrase “believed in good faith” refers to a state of mind and a belief that is held honestly,

genuinely, and sincerely, without collusion or fraud. It does not require that the belief also be objectively reasonable.

We presume that the *Vryonis* court considered it sound policy to impose an objective test for putative status and give reviewing courts authority to independently review putative status determinations by trial courts. We observe that before the doctrine was codified, it was an equitable judicial doctrine, and courts were free to mold and modify it in response to changing social conditions and evolving notions of fairness and justice. However, once the doctrine became a creature of statute, deciding policy and changing the definition of putative spouse and the application of the doctrine in response to it became the sole prerogative of the Legislature.

In our view, the *Vryonis* court intruded upon the Legislature's prerogative. It is a well-settled rule that courts must not add provisions to a statute under the guise of statutory interpretation to accomplish a purpose that does not appear on the face of the statute or from its legislative history. (*People v. Morris* (1988) 46 Cal.3d 1, 15, disapproved on other grounds in *In re Sassounian* (1995) 9 Cal.4th 535, 543-544, fn. 5; *People v. One 1940 Ford V-8 Coupe* (1950) 36 Cal.2d 471, 475; see § 1858.) Here, the court's addition of objective reasonableness to the statutory requirement of a good faith belief amounted to judicial legislation without even an attempt to disguise it as statutory construction.

We acknowledge that courts have uncritically accepted *Vryonis* and applied its objective test for many years. However, this history does not automatically give its analysis legitimacy or forever protect it from critical scrutiny, and we are not bound to follow it. (See 9 Witkin, *California Procedure* (5th ed. 2008) Appeal, § 498, pp. 558-559.) Although stare decisis is a sound rule of public policy and serves the interests of certainty, stability, and predictability in the law, "it nevertheless should not shield court-created error from correction." (*Cianci v. Superior Court* (1985) 40 Cal.3d 903, 924.)

Indeed, the field of legal history is littered with reexamined and then discarded judicial holdings that had been binding precedent for years. (E.g., *People v. Mendoza* (2000) 23 Cal.4th 896, 924 [reexamining and rejecting the holding in *People v. McDonald* (1984) 37 Cal.3d 351]; *Sierra Club v. San Joaquin Local Agency Formation Com.* (1999) 21 Cal.4th 489, 510 [same re holding in *Alexander v. State Personnel Bd.* (1943) 22 Cal.2d 198]; *Freeman & Mills, Inc. v. Belcher Oil Co.* (1995) 11 Cal.4th 85, 93 [same re holding in *Seaman's Direct Buying Service, Inc. v. Standard Oil Co.* (1984) 36 Cal.3d 752].)

Here, the policy of *stare decisis* carries little weight. Despite its widespread acceptance, *Vryonis* did not solely occupy the field. Rather, its holding created a conflict with prior cases holding that putative status was a factual question that required only a finding of good faith belief, which was upheld if supported by substantial evidence. (E.g., *Goldberg's Estate, supra*, 203 Cal.App.2d 402; *Neureither, supra*, 15 Cal.App.3d 429; *Wagner, supra*, 145 Cal.App.3d 980; see *Centinela Hospital, supra*, 215 Cal.App.3d at pp. 975-976 [recognizing conflict].)

Finally, on the issue of legislation, we acknowledge that after *Vryonis*, the Legislature enacted section 377.60 and amended it a few times. (See Stats. 1992, ch. 178, § 20, p. 893; Stats. 1996, ch. 563, § 1, p. 3143; Stats. 1997, ch. 13, § 1, p. 31; Stats. 2001, ch. 893, § 2, p. 7283; Stats. 2004, ch. 947, § 1, p. 7297.)<sup>14</sup> These circumstances implicate the rule of statutory construction “that when the Legislature amends a statute without altering portions of the provision that have previously been judicially construed, the Legislature is presumed to have been aware of and to have acquiesced in the previous judicial construction. Accordingly, reenacted portions of the statute are given the same construction they received before the amendment.

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<sup>14</sup> After *Vryonis*, the Legislature also repealed former Civil Code section 4452, the original codification of the doctrine, and reenacted it as section 2251 of the Family Code. (Stats. 1992, ch. 162, §§ 3 & 10, p. 464.)

[Citations.]” (*Marina Point, Ltd. v. Wolfson* (1982) 30 Cal.3d 721, 734-735.) However, we find the presumption inapplicable.

As noted, *Vryonis* created a conflict with prior cases holding that putative status required only a good faith belief and not a good faith *and reasonable* belief. When there is an unresolved conflict in the judicial holdings concerning the application of a statute, its reenactment cannot reasonably be deemed legislative acquiescence in either side of the conflict.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Although our discussion focuses solely on the addition of an objective test, the *Vryonis* court added another requirement. The court opined that it was not enough to believe in the validity of a marriage. Rather, to qualify for putative status, one had to believe in good faith that the marriage complied with California’s statutory requirements for a lawful marriage. Turning to the facts before it, the court reasoned that because Fereshteh had made no attempt to comply with the statutory prerequisites for lawful marriage, she could not have actually believed that her private religious ceremony had resulted in a lawful California marriage. (*Vryonis, supra*, 202 Cal.App.3d at p. 722-723.)

We need not analyze the court’s reasoning because here, the record establishes that Nancy and Robert attempted to comply with the statutory requirements. We note, however, that at least one commentator—Professor Bassett—finds this aspect of *Vryonis* particularly troubling. He questions the equation of a belief that a marriage is valid, as required by statute, with the belief that a marriage is *lawful* in that it complied with the California’s statutory requirements. He opines that this equation considerably narrows the traditional scope of the putative spouse doctrine and suggests that ignorance of the statutory requirements and the inevitable failure to comply with them preclude a good faith belief. According to Professor Bassett, this approach to determining putative status is overly formalistic and inconsistent with the equitable origin and purpose of the doctrine. (Bassett, *California Community Property Law, supra*, § 2:8, pp. 74-79.) Professor Bassett’s critique raises legitimate concerns about the propriety of this additional requirement.

We note that while the circumstances surrounding a marriage are relevant in determining good faith belief, ignorance of the law and failure to comply with statutory prerequisites have not invariably precluded a finding of good faith belief and putative status. (See, e.g., *Vallera, supra*, 21 Cal.2d at pp. 682-684 [no effort to get married in California]; *Wagner, supra*, 145 Cal.App.3d 980 [solemnization not a prerequisite to putative status]; *Monti, supra*, 135 Cal.App.3d at pp. 52-54, 56 [no effort to comply with California law]; *Sancha v. Arnold* (1952) 114 Cal.App.2d 772 [putative status based on common law marriage]; *Santos v. Santos, supra*, 32 Cal.App.2d 62 [putative status despite inability to speak English and ignorance of marriage laws].)

### ***Error in Granting Summary Judgment***

Given our rejection of *Vryonis*, we conclude that the trial court erred in applying an objective standard to determine Nancy's putative status and granting summary judgment on the ground that a belief in the validity of her four-year marriage to Robert was not objectively reasonable.<sup>16</sup> That error, however, does not necessarily require reversal. On appeal "[w]e need not defer to the trial court and are not bound by the reasons in its summary judgment ruling; we review the ruling of the trial court, not its rationale. [Citation.]" (*Oakland Raiders v. National Football League* (2005) 131 Cal.App.4th 621, 630.)

Again, the issue before the trial court was not whether there were triable issues concerning whether Nancy's belief was objectively reasonable. The determinative question was whether there were triable issues concerning whether Nancy believed in good faith that her marriage was valid. We conclude that there were.

Whether Nancy harbored a good faith belief involves a factual inquiry into her subjective state of mind: what did she know and believe; and was her belief honest, sincere, and genuine or tainted by fraud or collusion. (See *Knight, supra*, 4 Cal.App.4th at p. 932.) The determination of putative status also involves an inquiry into the circumstances before, during, and after the marriage.

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For example, suppose in *Vryonis* that Fereshteh had lived with Speros for many years after their religious marriage, raised a family, and accumulated a substantial amount of property, and he then decided to lawfully marry one of his students. In our view, denying Fereshteh a share of the property as a putative spouse because she was unaware of and thus made no attempt to comply with California's marriage laws would seem inconsistent with the fundamental equitable purpose of the doctrine: to protect the expectations of innocent parties to a marriage that later proves to be invalid.

<sup>16</sup> Although the trial court also relied on *Welch, supra*, 83 Cal.App.4th 1374, that case simply applied *Vryonis* to deny an alleged putative spouse standing to sue for the wrongful death of the man with whom she had lived as husband and wife for 30 years. Simply put, as goes reliance on *Vryonis*, so goes reliance on *Welch*.

In her declaration, Nancy said she believed her marriage was valid. She stated that Robert told her he was getting a divorce from Christine and then refused to discuss it any further. (Cf. *Goldberg's Estate, supra*, 203 Cal.App.2d 402 [man told woman that he was separated and getting a divorce].) She said she did not read the marriage license closely, implying that she did not know that Robert had falsely represented his marital history. She stated that she did not read the final divorce papers that he received and she then forwarded to his union. (Cf. *Sanguinetti, supra*, 9 Cal.2d 95 [woman believed her marriage was valid although divorce not yet final]; *Estate of Foy, supra*, 109 Cal. App.2d 329 [same].) Nancy also asserted, in essence, that if she had known that there was a problem before her wedding she would have postponed it; and if she had later learned that the wedding took place a few months too soon, they would have gotten remarried after the divorce became final.

If true, these statements could support a finding of good faith belief and establish putative status. However, the truth of Nancy's statements depends on her credibility. The credibility of a declarant, in general, cannot be assessed adequately in a motion for summary judgment; it is more appropriately determined through actual examination and cross-examination, during which the trier of fact can hear her testimony, observe the witness's demeanor, and decide whether the witness is being truthful. (See *Aguilar v. Atlantic Richfield Co., supra*, 25 Cal.4th at p. 856; *McCaskey v. California State Auto. Assn.* (2010) 189 Cal.App.4th 947, 987, fn. 24; *Looney v. Superior Court* (1993) 16 Cal.App.4th 521, 539; see also 437c, subd. (e).)

Defendant's argument below and the trial court's reasoning were that given the misrepresentation in the marriage license that Robert had no prior marriages, a reasonable person could not believe in good faith that the marriage was valid. As we have explained, whether a reasonable person would harbor a belief is irrelevant. Therefore, that theory does not support denial of putative status on summary judgment.

Although that theory is not viable, it could still be argued that even if, as Nancy stated, she did not read the license carefully, her failure to do so and her signing it despite the misrepresentation reflect a lack of diligence that, as a matter of law, negates a good faith belief. However, we reject this theory as a ground for granting summary judgment as well.

Although a marriage license is a requirement for a valid marriage (Fam. Code, §§ 300, 350), some defects in a marriage license, including intentional misrepresentations, do not invalidate a subsequent marriage. (See *id.*, § 306.) In *Argonaut Ins. Co. v. Industrial Acc. Com.* (1962) 204 Cal.App.2d 805, the court held that although the applicants knowingly provided false names on their marriage license, their subsequent marriage, which was properly solemnized, was valid. (*Id.* at pp. 809-810.)

It follows that one who provides false information on a marriage license can still believe in good faith that his or her marriage was valid because the misrepresentation does not necessarily preclude one from believing in good faith that a later, properly solemnized marriage was valid. This would especially be so where, as here, a party claims that he or she was unaware of the misrepresentation on the license.

Moreover, even if a marriage was rendered void for some reason completely unrelated to the misrepresentation in a license such as consanguinity, we would fail to see why the misrepresentation in the license should preclude putative status, where the parties solemnized the marriage and thereafter held themselves out as husband and wife, raised a family, and acquired property together. In our view, it would be anomalous and unfair to ignore the defects in a license when a marriage is otherwise valid but use the defects to deny putative status to parties whose marriage is rendered void for some reason unrelated to the defective marriage license.

It is true that when a party knows facts that are inconsistent with a rational belief in the validity of a marriage—e.g., actual knowledge that a previous marriage has not



been dissolved—that very knowledge can undermine an honest and sincere belief in the validity of the marriage. However, knowing that a license is inaccurate is not necessarily the same as knowing there is a legal impediment to a lawful marriage and not necessarily inconsistent with a good faith belief in the validity of a later properly solemnized marriage.

In short, if knowing that a marriage license is defective does not necessarily preclude putative status, then we do not consider the failure to read a license and discover an inaccuracy or misrepresentation necessarily to be so inconsistent with a good faith belief in the validity of a marriage as to preclude putative status.

Here, the license was inaccurate and misleading because it represented that Robert had no previous marriage. This inaccuracy does not necessarily establish an impediment to marriage, and whether Nancy knew about it is a triable issue of fact. The more pertinent question, however, is whether Nancy knew that Robert’s divorce was not final before they got married. That too was a triable issue of fact.

In sum, having independently reviewed the pleadings in support of and opposition to the motion for summary judgment, we find triable issues of fact that preclude summary judgment on the issue of Nancy’s putative status.

## **VII. DISPOSITION**

The judgment is reversed. Plaintiff is entitled to her costs on appeal. (Cal. Rules of Court, rule 8.278(a)(1).)

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RUSHING, P.J.

WE CONCUR:

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PREMO, J.

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ELIA, J.

*Ceja et al. v. Rudolph & Sletten, Inc.*  
**H034826**

Trial Court:

Santa Clara County Superior Court  
Superior Court Nos.: CV112520 and  
CV115283

Trial Judge:

The Honorable  
Mary Jo Levinger

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