Applying Wainright v. Sykes to State Alternative Holdings and Summary Affirmances

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INTRODUCTION

In 1963, the Supreme Court in *Fay v. Noia* rejected the proposition that the doctrine of adequate and independent state procedural grounds

2. This doctrine limits federal jurisdiction. The Supreme Court on direct review of a state court decision will not review the state judgment if it rests on adequate and independent state grounds. *See Michigan v. Long*, 463 U.S. 1032, 1041 (1983); *Henry v. Mississippi*, 379 U.S. 443, 446 (1965); *Herb v. Pitcairn*, 324 U.S. 117, 125 (1945); *Fox Film Corp. v. Muller*, 296 U.S. 207, 210 (1935); *Murdock v. City of Memphis*, 87 U.S. (20 Wall.) 590, 636 (1875). Justice Jackson speaking for the Court explained the reasoning:

[The reason] is found in the partitioning of power between the state and federal judicial systems and in the limitations of our own jurisdiction. Our only power over state judgments is to correct them to the extent that they incorrectly adjudicate federal rights. And our power is to correct wrong judgments, not to revise opinions. We are not permitted to render an advisory opinion, and if the same judgment would be rendered by the state court after we corrected its views of federal laws, our review could amount to nothing more than an advisory opinion.


It has been argued that the real rationale for the doctrine is that the federal question is mooted by the existence of a state ground which will support the judgment. J. Nowak, R. Rotunda & J. Young, *Constitutional Law* 95 (2d ed. 1983); see *Fay v. Noia*, 372 U.S. 391, 429-30 (1963). Whether this jurisdictional limit is statutory or constitutionally mandated is not settled. *See Sandalow, Henry v. Mississippi and the Adequate State Ground: Proposals for a Revised Doctrine*, 1965 Sup. Ct. Rev. 187, 188-89 & n.6. *Compare Noia*, 372 U.S. at 430 n.40 (expressing no opinion) *with id*. at 466-67 (Harlan, J., dissenting) (arguing that it is constitutionally mandated).

A distinction has been made between procedural and substantive state grounds. “While [this Court] has deferred to state substantive grounds so long as they are not patently evasive of or discriminatory against federal rights, it has sometimes refused to defer to state procedural grounds only because they made burdensome the vindication of federal rights.” *Noia*, 372 U.S. at 432; *see Henry v. Mississippi*, 379 U.S. 443, 446-48 (1965). *But see Hill, The Inadequate State Ground*, 65 Colum. L. Rev. 943, 989 (1965) [hereinafter cited as Hill I]; *Sandalow, supra*, at 197-99; Wechsler, *The Appellate Jurisdiction of the Supreme Court: Reflections on the Law and the Logistics of Direct Review*, 34 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 1043, 1054 (1977).

A state ground is adequate if it is sufficient in itself to maintain the judgment. *See Eustis v. Bolles*, 150 U.S. 361, 369-70 (1893). However, not all state procedural grounds are adequate to block consideration of the federal issue. *See, e.g.*, *Hathorn v. Lovorn*, 457 U.S. 255, 262-63 (1982) (default rule inconsistently applied cannot be invoked to bar federal claim); *NAACP v. Alabama*, 377 U.S. 288, 301 (1964) (new rule of procedure cannot be created to bar federal claim); *Davis v. Wechsler*, 263 U.S. 22, 24 (1923) (“Whatever springes [sic] the State may set for those who are endeavoring to assert rights that the State confers, the assertion of federal rights, when plainly and reasonably made, is not to be defeated under the name of local practice.”); *see also Brinkerhoff-Faris Trust & Sav. Co. v. Hill*, 281 U.S. 673, 680-82 (1930) (state procedural ground that is unconstitutional is not adequate); *Ward v. Board of County Comm’rs*, 253 U.S. 17, 22-23 (1920) (same). Whether the state procedural ground is adequate to block consideration of the federal issue is a question of federal law which federal courts must decide. *Henry v. Mississippi*, 379 U.S. 443, 447 (1965); *see Michigan v. Long*, 463 U.S. 1032, 1038 (1983); *Chapman v. California*, 386 U.S. 18, 21 (1967); *Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of Nobles*
constituted a jurisdictional bar to federal habeas corpus review of state criminal convictions. The Court held that although an adequate and independent state procedural ground blocked direct review by the Supreme Court, federal habeas relief remained available. The Court further stated that lower federal courts may exercise their jurisdiction to hear the petition of a prisoner who had lost the right to raise a federal constitutional issue because of a procedural default, unless the prisoner had "deliberately bypassed" the procedural rule.

Subsequent to Noia, the Court limited the discretion of federal courts to exercise habeas corpus jurisdiction. Indeed, in a series of cases culmi-
nating in *Wainwright v. Sykes* the Court substantially limited the reach of *Noia*. In *Sykes*, the habeas petitioner had forfeited his right to raise a federal constitutional claim in state court because he failed to object contemporaneously. The Supreme Court held that a federal habeas court could review a petition involving a procedural default only when a defendant could show cause for and prejudice arising from the default.


8. See *id.* at 87-88 & n.12. See *infra* note 70 and accompanying text.

9. See *id.* at 75, 86-87. Florida law required the defense to object at or prior to trial to the erroneous admission of a confession or be deemed to have waived the objection. See *id.* at 76 n.5, 86. The *Sykes* Court rejected the petitioner's contention that Florida did not have a contemporaneous objection rule, stating that "Florida procedure did, consistently with the United States Constitution, require that respondent's confession be challenged at trial or not at all." *Id.* at 86.


However, the definition of cause and prejudice is not clear. The *Sykes* Court left the definition to later cases. See *Sykes*, 433 U.S. at 87; see also *Engle v. Isaac*, 456 U.S. 107, 144 (1982) (Brennan, J., dissenting). The Court in *Reed v. Ross*, 104 S. Ct. 2901 (1984), described some of the boundaries of the cause requirement, stating:

a defendant is bound by the tactical decisions of competent counsel . . . and that defense counsel may not flout state procedures and then turn around and seek refuge in federal court from the consequences of such conduct . . . .

On the other hand, the cause requirement may be satisfied under certain circumstances when a procedural failure is not attributable to an intentional decision by counsel made in pursuit of his client's interests. *Id.* at 2909 (citations omitted).

Prejudice may be demonstrated by showing that no evidence, other than the challenged evidence, supports the prisoner's conviction, see *United States v. Frady*, 456 U.S. 152, 172 (1982), and that the errors at trial "worked to his actual and substantial disadvantage, infecting [the] entire trial with error of constitutional dimensions." *Id.* at 170 (emphasis in original). This prong may be a variation of the harmless error doctrine. Compare *Chapman v. California*, 386 U.S. 18, 24 (1967) (on direct appellate review, state has burden of proving the error was harmless) with *Wainwright v. Sykes*, 433 U.S. 72, 91 (1977) (habeas applicant has not shown cause and prejudice) and *id.* at 117 (Brennan, J., dissenting) (noting similarity to harmless error).

Whatever the exact definition of cause and prejudice may be, it has been viewed as a significant barrier to obtaining federal habeas review. See *Engle v. Isaac*, 456 U.S. 107, 144 (1982) (Brennan, J., dissenting). The barrier, however, may have been lowered somewhat by the Court's decision in *Reed v. Ross*, 104 S. Ct. 2901 (1984), which held that a novel claim may satisfy the cause test. See *id.* at 2910.
However, when a state court "forgives" the default and decides the case solely on the constitutional issue, a federal court may freely entertain the habeas petition.\textsuperscript{11}

In\textit{ Sykes} the state courts—trial and appellate—did not discuss the merits of the petitioner's constitutional claim, because the claim was never presented on direct review.\textsuperscript{12} The Supreme Court acknowledged that, under the circumstances, the claim would have been barred by the state procedural ground.\textsuperscript{13} Since\textit{ Sykes}, lower federal courts have disagreed over whether the cause and prejudice standard applies in the case of alternative holdings,\textsuperscript{14} in which the state court dismisses the petitioner’s federal claim due to a procedural default but also reaches and dismisses the federal claim on the merits. Some courts have held that despite the state court's procedural dismissal,\textit{ Sykes} does not apply if the state court has also decided the merits of the federal constitutional claim.\textsuperscript{15} Others have held that\textit{ Sykes} applies if a procedural ground was a substantial basis for the state court's decision.\textsuperscript{16} A third group has held that\textit{ Sykes} applies whenever the state court finds a procedural default, regardless of whether the merits of the claim were also reached.\textsuperscript{17}

When a state court bases its decision on two independent holdings—

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item See\textsuperscript{12} Wainwright v.\textit{ Sykes}, 433 U.S. 72, 75 & n.3 (1977).
\item See\textsuperscript{13} id. at 85-87. The Court further held that if the state court had relied on that procedural ground, that reliance would have barred direct federal review. \textit{See id.} at 86-87.
\item See\textsuperscript{14} infra note 18 for a definition of alternative holdings.
\item The Eleventh Circuit presents a unique approach to this problem. In Dobbert v. Strickland, 718 F.2d 1518 (11th Cir. 1983),\textit{ cert. denied}, 104 S. Ct. 3591 (1984), the court stated that an alternative holding is sufficient to trigger the\textit{ Sykes} rule. \textit{See id.} at 1524. Nevertheless, in a subsequent case the Eleventh Circuit held that\textit{ Sykes} did not bar review, even though it recognized that the state court had made an alternative holding. \textit{See Darden v. Wainwright, 699 F.2d 1031 (11th Cir.), aff'd by an evenly divided court}, 708 F.2d 646 (11th Cir.) (en banc),\textit{ vacated on other grounds}, 715 F.2d 502 (11th Cir. 1983) (en banc),\textit{ aff'd in part, rev'd in part on other grounds}, 725 F.2d 1526 (11th Cir.) (en banc),\textit{ cert. denied}, 104 S. Ct. 2688 (1984),\textit{ vacated on other grounds}, 105 S. Ct. 1158 (1985). The\textit{ Darden} court relied on the fact that the merits of the petitioner's claim was a basis for the state court's decision. \textit{See id.}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
one procedural and one substantive, for example—the court’s holding is said to be in the alternative. Because both holdings can independently support the court’s decision, they each constitute binding precedent. However, if a court fails to state explicitly that its decision is based on two independent holdings, a reviewing court might interpret the opinion as resting on only one.

Assume that the two possible grounds are A—the independent state ground—and B—the federal constitutional ground. The reviewing court can interpret the decision in three different ways. The first interpretation is that A is the sole basis of the state court’s decision and that B is dictum. Under this interpretation, the state court’s decision is not characterized as an alternative holding because it rests only on A. In this situation, it is generally agreed that Sykes applies. A second interpretation is that A and B each independently supports the state court’s deci-

18. See Phillips v. Smith, 717 F.2d 44, 46-47, 49 (2d Cir. 1983), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 1287 (1984). “Where the judgment is based upon two alternative grounds, one on the merits and the other not on the merits, there is a decision on both grounds although either alone would have been sufficient to support the judgment . . . .” Restatement of Judgments § 49 comment c (1942).

If the judgment of the court of first instance was based upon two alternative grounds, either of which would be sufficient to support the judgment, and the appellate court holds that both of these grounds are sufficient, and accordingly affirms the judgment, the judgment is conclusive as to both grounds in a subsequent action on a different cause of action.

If the appellate court determines that one of these grounds is sufficient but that the other is not, and accordingly affirms the judgment, the judgment is conclusive only as to the first ground.

If the appellate court determines that one of these grounds is sufficient and refuses to consider whether or not the other ground is sufficient, and accordingly affirms the judgment, the judgment is conclusive only as to the first ground.

Id. at § 69 comment b (citation omitted).

An alternative holding should be distinguished from an alternative judgment. The alternative holding results in a judgment. That judgment can also be in the alternative—meaning that the party against whom the judgment was entered may satisfy that judgment in one of several ways. See Kaybill Corp. v. Cherne, 24 Ill. App. 3d 309, 313-14, 315-16, 320 N.E.2d 598, 602-03, 604 (1974); Donaldson v. Greenwood, 40 Wash. 2d 238, 251-52, 242 P.2d 1038, 1044, 1046 (1952); State v. Wilson, 216 N.C. 130, 133, 4 S.E.2d 440, 442 (1939).

The alternative holding disposes of one issue, but gives two reasons for that disposition. See United States ex rel. Caruso v. Zelinsky, 689 F.2d 435, 439-40 (3d Cir. 1982). For example, a claim of constitutional immunity against the use of testimony could be dismissed exclusively on the merits or on a procedural basis, or on both grounds.


21. See R. Cross, supra note 19, at 87, 89.


23. See supra notes 18-20 and accompanying text.

Circuits that hold that a state court opinion must rest exclusively on the procedural ground will apply the Sykes test when the state court merely discussed the federal constitutional claim in dictum. See Hall v. Wainwright, 733 F.2d 766, 777 (11th Cir. 1984), cert. denied, 105 S. Ct. 2344 (1985); Ratcliff v. Estelle, 597 F.2d 474, 475-76, 478 (5th Cir.), cert. denied, 444 U.S. 868 (1979). The Fifth Circuit has stated that the applicable rule is that "if the state courts entertained the federal claims on the merits, a federal cert. denied, constitutional claim in dictum. The Sykes rule is that "if 'the state courts entertained the federal claims on the merits, a federal cert. denied, the Tenth Circuit similarly applies the Sykes rule when the state court merely discussed the federal claim in dictum, regardless of cause and prejudice. See id. at 477-78. For instance, in Lefkowitz v. Newsome, 420 U.S. 283 (1975), there was no procedural default. See id. at 289-90. The Newsome Court stated its holding was "that when state law permits a defendant to plead guilty without forfeiting his right to judicial review of specified constitutional issues, the defendant is not foreclosed from pursuing those constitutional claims in a federal habeas corpus proceeding." Id. at 293. The footnote in the Newsome opinion referred to by the Ratcliff Court distinguished Pay v. Noia, 372 U.S. 391 (1963), by pointing out that there was no bypass, deliberate or otherwise, in the Newsome case. See Newsome, 420 U.S. at 291-92 & n.9. The other case cited was Newman v. Henderson, 425 U.S. 967 (1976), in which the Supreme Court vacated the lower court's judgment, citing Newsome, 420 U.S. at 292 n.9, and Francis v. Henderson, 425 U.S. 536, 542 n.5 (1976). Newsome has already been discussed. The footnote in Francis referred to by the Supreme Court says in its entirety: "In a case where the state courts have declined to impose a waiver but have considered the merits of the prisoner's claim, different considerations would, of course, be applicable. See Lefkowitz v. Newsome, 420 U.S. 283." Francis v. Henderson, 425 U.S. 536, 542 n.5 (1976). Since the lower federal courts applied a procedural bar when the state courts had not, the Supreme Court's holding did not allow a federal court to disregard a state court's holding that no default existed when that holding forgave a procedural default and went on to the merits of petitioner's federal claims. Other cases pointed to by Ratcliff involved holdings on the merits and dictum as to procedural grounds. See Ratcliff, 597 F.2d at 477-78. Finally, the state court in Ratcliff discussed the federal issue in dictum, and squarely held that that claim was barred by a procedural default. See id. at 478. Thus, the Fifth Circuit will apply the Sykes rule when the state court discusses the federal ground in dictum, but nonetheless holds the claim barred by a procedural default.

The Eleventh Circuit similarly imposes the Sykes rule when the state court merely comments in dictum on the federal claim, but holds on the procedural ground. See, e.g., Hall v. Wainwright, 733 F.2d 766, 777-78 (11th Cir. 1984) (Sykes applied despite the state court's discussion of the merits); Dobbert v. Strickland, 718 F.2d 1518, 1524 (11th Cir. 1983) ("where a state court clearly and correctly applies a procedural default rule, Sykes requires the federal court to abide by the state court's decision even though the state court discusses the merits as an alternate ground for rejecting a claim"), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 3591 (1984).

The Tenth Circuit similarly applies the Sykes rule despite the state court's comments in dictum on the federal constitutional issue. See Runnels v. Hess, 653 F.2d 1359, 1363 (10th Cir. 1981). In Runnels, the state appellate court noted that the prosecutor improperly directed the attention of the jury to the defendant's failure to testify, but held that the claim was barred by a procedural default. See Runnels v. State, 562 P.2d 932, 937 (Okla. Crim. App. 1977), cert. denied, 434 U.S. 893 (1977).

Circuits holding that Sykes applies if the state court's decision was substantially based on a procedural ground also apply Sykes when the federal constitutional discussion is dictum. See Dietz v. Solem, 640 F.2d 126, 131-32 & n.1 (8th Cir. 1981) (state court held on procedural ground and its discussion of federal issue was dictum); Hockenbury v.
sion, and, therefore, A and B are both binding precedent. Here, the state court's decision is properly characterized an alternative holding, and the courts are divided as to whether Sykes applies. A third interpretation is that the procedural ground A is dictum and that the federal ground B is the sole basis of the opinion. Again, this is not an alternative holding because the state court's decision is interpreted as resting only on B. In this case, it is generally agreed that Sykes does not apply.

These three possiblities assume that the federal reviewing court can reasonably interpret the state court's opinion. Some opinions, however, are not easily susceptible to interpretation. A classic example is the summary affirmance, in which the state court fails to give any reasons for its decision. In this situation, the federal courts are again split as to whether Sykes applies.

Part I of this Note discusses the application of the Sykes cause and prejudice test when the state court bases its decision on only one ground—substantive or procedural—and discusses the other in dictum. Part II examines whether the Sykes test should also apply when the state court's holding is based on independent and adequate state procedural grounds as well as on federal constitutional grounds—the alternative holding. Part III discusses the inappropriateness of applying the Sykes standard when the basis of the state court's holding is unclear.

This Note concludes that if a state court decides a claim against the defendant on adequate and independent procedural grounds, the Sykes cause and prejudice test should apply regardless of any further comments by that court on the federal constitutional ground. Thus, Sykes should apply to alternative holdings. However, when the state court forgives the default, decides the case solely on a federal constitutional issue or fails to clearly identify the basis of its holding, the federal habeas court should review the state court's holding without regard to the Sykes cause and prejudice standard.

Sowders, 620 F.2d 111, 115-16 (6th Cir. 1980) (state court held substantially on procedural ground, but also discussed merits), cert. denied, 450 U.S. 933 (1981).


26. See supra notes 18-20 and accompanying text.

27. See supra notes 15-17 and accompanying text.


29. See supra notes 18-20 and accompanying text.

30. See infra note 57 and accompanying text.


32. See infra note 118 and accompanying text.
I. THE APPLICATION OF THE SYKES STANDARD WHEN THE STATE COURT'S DECISION IS BASED ON ONLY ONE GROUND

Although two grounds for deciding an issue may exist, the state court may choose to rely on only one. It may decide the case on an available procedural ground, and comment in dictum on the federal issue. In contrast, it can choose to decide the case on the merits of the federal claim, and comment in dictum that the claim could have been precluded by a procedural default.

A. The Procedural Ground Is the Basis of the State Court's Decision and Its Discussion of the Federal Issue Is Dictum

In Wainwright v. Sykes, the Supreme Court held that when a state court has not resolved or ruled on a federal constitutional claim based on a procedural default in state court, a federal court may not grant habeas relief absent a showing of cause and prejudice. In light of Sykes' strict language, the suggestion that any state court's comment on a federal issue, even dictum, suffices to open federal habeas review is untenable for several reasons. First, when a federal habeas court decides that the state court's comments concerning the merits of petitioner's constitutional claim are dictum, the state court has not resolved or adjudicated the federal issue. Thus, Sykes properly applies. Moreover, the Supreme Court has repeatedly held that state procedural defaults alone can preclude federal review of the merits of a criminal conviction despite the petitioner's later assertions of constitutional violations. Indeed, a state court need not even discuss a constitutional claim if that claim is "waived" or "defaulted" because of the violation of a valid procedural rule. Thus, when a state court considers the constitutional issue in dictum but dismisses the claim on a state procedural ground that would bar direct Supreme Court review, the Sykes rule should apply in full force.

Concern that state courts will "hide behind" procedural grounds to defeat federal rights is unfounded. Not all procedural grounds constitute adequate and independent state grounds. The resolution of this issue is

34. See id. at 86-87. See supra note 10 for a discussion of cause and prejudice.
35. In the absence of that comment, habeas review would be unavailable without a showing of cause and prejudice. See supra note 10 and accompanying text.
37. See supra note 24 and accompanying text.
40. See Hill I, supra note 2, at 944-53. Examples of procedural rules that will not bar
a federal question which a federal habeas court is competent to decide. If a state court denies the federal constitutional claim on an inadequate state ground it risks having the conviction vacated on federal habeas review. Considering the potentially overwhelming problems of retrial, a prosecutor should be loath to rely on inadequate state procedural grounds. Further, the Sykes rule will not bar federal review should the petitioner show cause and prejudice. This exception was designed in part to prevent miscarriages of justice. Therefore, if the state unreasonably invokes a procedural rule to prevent the defendant from asserting a constitutional claim, the federal court might properly find a miscarriage of justice amounting to cause and prejudice.

Federal review of federal constitutional claims include a default rule that is inconsistently applied, rules that are unconstitutional, rules that are newly created to bar the federal claim and overly technical rules of local practice. See supra note 2.


42. See Walker v. Engle, 703 F.2d 959, 966-67 & nn.10-11 (6th Cir. 1983) (asserted procedural bar by state court that has no basis in fact or law will not bar federal review), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 396 (1984); Kozerski v. Smith, 555 F. Supp. 212, 216-18 (D.N.H. 1983) (indigent’s failure to notarize motion claiming indigency due to inability to pay notary fee is not adequate to bar federal habeas review).


44. Cf. Wainwright v. Sykes, 433 U.S. 72, 89 (1977) (prosecutor may avoid using testimony that may result in reversal on direct appeal or in federal habeas relief).

45. See id. at 87. Sykes does not preclude all review of a claim merely because there has been a procedural default. Rather, the claim may still be considered on the merits if the petitioner can demonstrate cause and prejudice. See Reed v. Ross, 104 S. Ct. 2901, 2906-07 (1984). See supra note 10.

46. See id. at 90-91.

47. See Engle v. Isaac, 456 U.S. 107, 135 (1982) ("we are confident that victims of a fundamental miscarriage of justice will meet the cause—and—prejudice standard"); Phillips v. Smith, 717 F.2d 44, 49 (2d Cir. 1983) (states will not sacrifice federal constitutional rights "because the cause and prejudice test allows for federal habeas review, despite a procedural default, to prevent a fundamental miscarriage of justice"), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 1287 (1984); Huffman v. Wainwright, 651 F.2d 347, 351 (5th Cir. 1981) (explaining that Fifth Circuit defines cause to protect "defendants who have not strategically withheld constitutional objections in state court proceedings from the possibility of injustice"); Hill II, supra note 10, at 1076-78 (listing factors which might guide a finding of a miscarriage of justice). But see Engle v. Isaac, 456 U.S. 107, 129 (1982) (Sykes test is not limited to constitutional errors which impair truthfinding—implying that cause and prejudice might block habeas review despite petitioner’s possible innocence).

Moreover if the state court asserts a procedural default which is "an obvious subterfuge to evade consideration of a federal issue," this will not constitute an adequate state ground. Radio Station WOW, Inc. v. Johnson, 326 U.S. 120, 129 (1945); see Mullaney v. Wilbur, 421 U.S. 684, 691 & n.11 (1975); Williams v. Georgia, 349 U.S. 375, 382-83, 389
Finally, post-Sykes cases compel the conclusion that Sykes applies if the state court dismissed the claim on adequate and independent procedural grounds, although it also discussed the federal constitutional claim in dictum. For example, in County Court v. Allen, 48 although the state court had addressed the merits of the constitutional claim, 49 the Supreme Court on habeas review nevertheless searched the record to determine whether the state court had relied on a procedural default. 50 The Court indicated that such a ground would have triggered the Sykes cause and prejudice test. 51 Therefore, a state court may comment in dictum on the merits of the constitutional claim without subjecting the conviction to federal habeas review if its actual holding is based solely on an adequate and independent state procedural ground.

B. The Constitutional Ground Is the Basis of the State Court's Decision and Its Discussion of the Procedural Ground Is Dictum

When a federal habeas court interprets a state court's holding as resting on the constitutional basis, with the consideration of the procedural ground either reduced to dictum or the default forgiven, habeas review is available for two reasons. First, when the state court's holding is based solely on the merits of the federal ground, the rule of Brown v. Allen 52 entitles the petitioner to federal habeas review of his federal contention because that claim is not barred by a procedural default. 53

Second, as discussed earlier, the scope of direct review with respect to adequate and independent state procedural grounds parallels the Sykes habeas corpus rule. 54 The Sykes standard applies only when an adequate and independent state procedural ground would block direct review. 55 When a state procedural ground is not relied on or is forgiven, direct federal review is not barred, 56 and Sykes does not apply. 57

(1955). Finally, if the asserted state ground is not adequate, the Sykes bar does not apply. See supra notes 17-19 and accompanying text.

49. See id. at 145-46.
50. See id. at 149-54.
51. See id. at 148-49.
52. 344 U.S. 443 (1953). See infra notes 73-78 and accompanying text.
54. See supra note 10.
55. See supra notes 10, 41-42.
57. See County Court v. Allen, 442 U.S. 140, 154 (1979); Corn v. Zant, 708 F.2d 549, 555 n.2 (11th Cir. 1983), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 2670 (1984); Walker v. Engle, 703 F.2d
II. THE APPLICATION OF SYKES TO ALTERNATIVE HOLDINGS BASED ON STATE PROCEDURAL AND FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL GROUNDS

When a federal habeas court interprets a state court's decision as an alternative holding based on state procedural grounds and on federal constitutional grounds, the Sykes cause and prejudice standard should apply as long as the state procedural ground is adequate and independent. As a matter of procedure, most courts hold that to reverse a conviction based on alternative grounds, both grounds must be negated. If only one of the grounds is erroneous, the conviction may stand on the other ground. Similarly, because a state judgment may stand on a procedural ground, the federal court must in some way overrule or disregard that ground before it can issue a writ of habeas corpus. Otherwise fed-


The Supreme Court has stated that when a state court does not rely on an available state ground, the federal habeas court should not bar review on the basis of that state ground. See Lefkowitz v. Newsome, 420 U.S. 283, 292 n.9 (1975); Irvin v. Dowd, 359 U.S. 344, 406 (1959).


59. See supra notes 40-42 and accompanying text.

60. See Michigan v. Long, 463 U.S. 1032, 1042 (1983) (if a state court decision rests on two grounds, one of which could be reversed by the Supreme Court, the same judgment will be rendered if the other ground remains as an adequate and independent state ground); Wright v. Georgia, 373 U.S. 284, 287-89 (1963) (state decision seemed to rest on both merits and on procedural default, Supreme Court held procedural ground inadequate and reversed state court's holding on merits, reversing the conviction); cf. Restatement of Judgments § 49 comment c, § 69 comment b (1942) (a civil judgment based on alternative grounds will stand if one ground is overruled, but the other ground is left standing).

61. See Michigan v. Long, 463 U.S. 1032, 1041-42 (1983) (state criminal conviction will stand regardless of Supreme Court's disposition of the federal issue if the conviction rests alternatively on adequate state grounds); cf. Benton v. Maryland, 395 U.S. 784, 787-89 (1969) (when appellant is sentenced to concurrent sentences, prisoner will serve one sentence even if other is reversed); Department of Mental Hygiene v. Kirchner, 380 U.S. 194, 196-97 (1965) (civil judgment will stand on alternative ground); Halpern v. Schwartz, 426 F.2d 102, 105-06 (2d Cir. 1970) (same); Markoff v. New York Life Ins. Co., 369 F. Supp. 308, 313 (D. Nev. 1973) (same), aff'd, 530 F.2d 841 (9th Cir. 1976); Restatement of Judgments § 49 comment c, § 69 comment b (1942) (same); Restatement (Second) of Judgments § 27 comment i (1982) (same); 46 Am. Jur. 2d, Judgments § 463 (1969) (same); Annot., 157 A.L.R. 1038, 1045 (1945) (same).

eral habeas "relief" will constitute nothing but an advisory opinion, and the alternative state procedural ground will not be negated. At best, all that a federal decision would accomplish under these circumstances would be the correction of an erroneous state view of federal law, a view that was not essential to the state holding.

It is well settled that a federal court may not overrule a state procedural holding on state law grounds. The federal court must therefore negate the state ground as a matter of federal law. If it rules that the state ground is not adequate and independent, it would have the discretion to entertain the habeas petition. An alternative holding based on federal law and inadequate state procedural grounds would then be reviewable without a showing of cause and prejudice. This Note assumes, however, that the state procedural ground is adequate and independent.

The federal court could acknowledge the existence of the state procedural ground but choose to "overlook" it, so that it will not block the issuance of the federal writ. This was the case in Fay v. Noia, when the Court held that a federal habeas court could overlook the procedural

63. See Herb v. Pitcairn, 324 U.S. 117, 125-26 (1945); see also Fay v. Noia, 372 U.S. 391, 429 (1963) (federal question would be moot or opinion would be advisory); J. Nowak, R. Rotunda & J. Young, supra note 2, at 95 (arguing that the proper rationale for refusing to decide the case is mootness). For discussions of advisory opinions, see generally id. at 61-64; L. Tribe, American Constitutional Law § 3-10, at 56-57 (1978); C. Wright, supra note 2, § 12, at 57-58.


However, the Supreme Court will review the state court disposition of the state ground if that decision appears to be an "obvious subterfuge to evade consideration of a federal issue." Radio Station WOW, Inc. v. Johnson, 326 U.S. 120, 129 (1945); see Mullaney v. Wilbur, 421 U.S. 684, 691 & n.11 (1975); Williams v. Georgia, 349 U.S. 375, 382-83, 389 (1955); Lawrence v. State Tax Comm'n, 286 U.S. 276, 282 (1932); Davis v. Wechsler, 263 U.S. 22, 24 (1923).

This exception is paralleled in habeas corpus by the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)(8) (1982), which provide for new findings of fact if the state court's factual determination is not fairly supported by the evidence. See id.; see also Sumner v. Mata, 449 U.S. 539, 549-50 (1981) (discussing application of § 2254(d)).

65. See supra note 3 and accompanying text.

66. See, e.g., Walker v. Engle, 703 F.2d 959, 966-67 & nn.10-11 (6th Cir. 1983) (asserted procedural bar by state that has no support in fact or law is inadequate), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 396 (1984); Breest v. Perrin, 655 F.2d 1, 2 & n.1 (1st Cir.) (contemporaneous objection rule is adequate), cert. denied, 454 U.S. 1059 (1981); In re Kravitz, 488 F. Supp. 38, 45 (M.D. Pa. 1979) (ordering hearing as to adequacy of state ground).


default unless it was intentional. To the extent that Noia was willing to ignore the state procedural ground without a separate showing of cause and prejudice by the defendant, however, it has since been limited by Sykes.

A federal court may no longer overlook the procedural aspect of an alternative holding unless it can demonstrate that Sykes was not meant to apply to alternative holdings. In short, the federal court must determine whether, in the case of an alternative holding, it can overlook the procedural default without requiring the petitioner to show cause and prejudice.

The Sykes rule can be read in two ways. A narrow interpretation is that cause and prejudice must be shown if and only if the state court, because of the procedural default, makes no comment on the federal constitutional issue. Thus, Sykes would not apply whenever the state court rules on the merits of the constitutional claim, regardless of its disposition of the procedural ground. A broader interpretation of the Sykes rule, however, is that the cause and prejudice standard applies whenever a state court relies on an adequate and independent state ground. This interpretation would allow the state court to rule on both the federal and state issues without exposing the conviction or the federal issue to federal habeas review.

At first blush, the language of Sykes appears to support the narrow interpretation. Closer analysis, however, suggests that the Court had the broader interpretation in mind. For example, when referring to Sykes' effect on the rule of Brown v. Allen, the Sykes Court stated that "we deal only with contentions of federal law which were not resolved on the merits in the state proceeding due to respondent's failure to raise them there as required by state procedure." Arguably, this language indicates that Sykes should not apply to alternative holdings. However, immediately prior to this statement the Court identified the rule of Brown v. Allen as guaranteeing a state prisoner independent federal habeas review of his federal constitutional claim irrespective of the state court interpretation of that issue. The rule of Brown v. Allen thus guarantees

69. See id. at 433-34. See supra note 3.
71. See Lowery v. Estelle, 696 F.2d 333, 342 n.28 (5th Cir. 1983); Rogers v. McMullen, 673 F.2d 1185, 1188 (11th Cir. 1982), cert. denied, 459 U.S. 1110 (1983); Thompson v. Estelle, 642 F.2d 996, 998 (5th Cir. 1981); Bradford v. Stone, 594 F.2d 1294, 1296 n.2 (9th Cir. 1979).
72. See Phillips v. Smith, 717 F.2d 44, 48 (2d Cir. 1983), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 1287 (1984); United States ex rel. Veal v. DeRobertis, 693 F.2d 642, 650 (7th Cir. 1982); United States ex rel. Caruso v. Zielinsky, 689 F.2d 435, 440 (3d Cir. 1982); see also Jones v. Jago, 701 F.2d 45, 47 n.2 (6th Cir. 1983) (when alternative holding exists, the procedural ground can be a substantial basis of the decision sufficient to meet the Sixth Circuit's "substantial basis" test), cert. denied, 104 S. Ct. 274 (1984).
73. 344 U.S. 443 (1953).
75. 344 U.S. 443 (1953).
76. See Sykes, 433 U.S. at 87. The opinion states:
independent federal habeas review when an adequate, independent state procedural ground does not exist to bar such review. It was not intended to guarantee federal review simply because the state court discussed the federal issue. Indeed, Brown held explicitly that an adequate and independent state procedural ground would bar federal habeas relief. Thus, Sykes' discussion of Brown is properly read as reaffirming the existence of independent federal habeas review of federal constitutional claims when there exists no adequate state procedural ground barring such review. It does not limit the use of the adequate and independent state ground doctrine in habeas corpus proceedings.

The Sykes Court also did not read Brown v. Allen as having been modified by Fay v. Noia. Sykes stated that Brown v. Allen guaranteed independent federal habeas review of dispositive federal issues, which in the context of Brown did not include alternative holdings when one ground was an adequate and independent state procedural ground. Under Noia, any federal issue, dispositive or not, guaranteed federal habeas review absent a deliberate bypass. Moreover, Sykes explicitly rejected the Noia rule, which allowed the federal habeas court to ignore the state procedural ground, unless a deliberate bypass was shown. It therefore read Brown independently of Noia.

A second example of ambiguous language in Sykes is the Court's statement that "the [cause and prejudice] rule will not prevent a federal habeas court from adjudicating for the first time the federal constitutional claim of a defendant." One might argue this language implies that the rule is inapplicable to review of a conviction when the state court has adjudicated the claim, albeit in the alternative. The sentence continues, however, adding, "who in the absence of such an adjudication will

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[S]ince Brown v. Allen . . . it has been the rule that the federal habeas petitioner who claims he is detained pursuant to a final judgment of a state court in violation of the United States Constitution is entitled to have the federal habeas court make its own independent determination of his federal claim, without being bound by the determination on the merits of that claim reached in the state proceedings. This rule of Brown v. Allen is in no way changed by our holding today. Rather, we deal only with contentions of federal law which were not resolved on the merits in the state proceeding due to respondent's failure to raise them there as required by state procedure.

Id. (citation omitted) (emphasis in original).

77. See Sykes, 433 U.S. at 82; Brown, 344 U.S. at 485-86.
78. Brown, 344 U.S. at 485-87; see Sykes, 433 U.S. at 82. In a companion case to Brown, the petitioner was denied federal habeas review due to a procedural default. Brown, 344 U.S. at 485-87.
80. 344 U.S. 443 (1953).
82. See supra notes 73-78 and accompanying text.
84. See id. at 398-99, 438.
85. See Sykes, 433 U.S. at 87.
86. Id. at 91.
be the victim of a miscarriage of justice." An accurate rewording of this statement is that a state prisoner who is the victim of a miscarriage of justice will not be barred from federal habeas review despite his default. Thus, in the case of alternative holdings, the state court's holding on procedural grounds should block federal habeas review unless the petitioner can demonstrate cause and prejudice or that the state's reliance on the procedural ground results in a miscarriage of justice. The statement does not indicate that the Court intended to immunize alternative holdings from its decision; rather, it merely reaffirms that the cause and prejudice standard is flexible enough to deal with those isolated cases in which a miscarriage of justice might have occurred. Therefore, rather than showing that Sykes applies only when the state court has not adjudicated the federal claim, this statement is one example of the use of the cause and prejudice standard.

Moreover, the Court has held that when a state conviction is based on adequate and independent state grounds sufficient to bar direct federal review, federal habeas review will be available only after a showing of cause and prejudice. An alternative holding is immune from direct federal review if it is based on adequate and independent state grounds. If such a holding is sufficient to bar completely direct review, it would a fortiori be sufficient to bar habeas review unless the Sykes test is met.

Finally, the policies emphasized by the Court in Sykes compel its application to alternative state holdings. In Sykes and subsequent habeas decisions, the Burger Court has emphasized the need to protect systemic interests over and above individual liberties. Applying the cause and prejudice test to alternative holdings protects these systemic interests. Allowing free habeas review would injure them.

A major interest furthered by Sykes is respect for coordinate units of

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87. Id. The full text reads:

The "cause"-and-"prejudice" exception of the Francis rule will afford an adequate guarantee, we think, that the rule will not prevent a federal habeas court from adjudicating for the first time the federal constitutional claim of a defendant who in the absence of such an adjudication will be the victim of a miscarriage of justice.

Id. at 90-91.

88. See id. at 86-87. See supra note 10.


the federal and state judicial systems. This policy is based on comity and is seriously undermined if Sykes is not applied to alternative holdings. For instance, a federal court shows disrespect for a state rule if it is allowed to disregard an adequate and independent state procedural rule that is part of an alternative holding. In Sykes, the Supreme Court stressed that such rules should be respected by the federal courts. By applying cause and prejudice to alternative grounds, full respect and effect are given to state procedural rules, thus promoting comity.

A second systemic policy furthered by Sykes is the promotion of finality of litigation. Sykes forces the defense to raise all issues at trial or risk a procedural default. This furthers accuracy of results at trial and general judicial efficiency. Accuracy is maximized because all issues are placed before the trier of fact, enabling it to make an informed decision. Applying Sykes to alternative holdings would encourage defense counsel to contest all issues at trial, or risk losing them both on direct appeal and habeas review.

In addition, if Sykes is not applied to alternative holdings, state courts may stop writing opinions with alternative holdings. If an adequate and independent state procedural ground exists, a state court may decide to limit its decision solely on that ground in order to avoid federal habeas review. Placing the state courts in this dilemma violates comity because it unnecessarily discourages them from exercising their full juris-


93. See Sykes, 433 U.S. at 88.


99. See id. at 51; United States ex rel. Caruso v. Zelinsky, 689 F.2d 435, 440 (3d Cir. 1982).
diction and unjustifiably restricts their freedom in writing decisions. Furthermore, because alternative holdings promote efficiency and finality of litigation, they should be encouraged rather than discouraged. An alternative holding allows a lower court to resolve a case on all possible grounds, thus providing the appellate court with findings on all possible dispositions of the issues before it. If it turns out that one of the grounds is erroneous, the appellate court can affirm the judgment on the alternative ground, thus promoting efficiency and finality. On the other hand, if the alternative holding is not made, the appellate court must remand the case to the lower court for determination of the other ground—a time-consuming procedure. Finally, alternative holdings should be encouraged because they contribute to the development of the jurisdiction's precedents and law, thus providing maximum guidance to the lower courts.

A final systemic policy asserted by the Burger Court for limiting the exercise of federal habeas corpus jurisdiction is that it deprives society of the right to punish the guilty. While it is true that the state can retry the successful habeas petitioner, often habeas relief comes years after the original trial. As time passes, memories fade and witnesses become difficult to locate. In such cases retrial is effectively impossible and the state is forced to simply let the petitioner go. The limits placed by the Burger Court on habeas review have reduced this undesirable result. The necessity of freeing guilty prisoners would be reduced even further if Sykes is applied to alternative holdings.

In Fay v. Noia, the Warren Court noted several policies that support unlimited federal habeas review of alternative holdings. These policies did not survive the Burger Court's decision in Sykes, however, and therefore do not allow a federal habeas court to disregard a state procedural

100. See United States ex rel. Caruso v. Zelinsky, 689 F.2d at 440.
103. See supra notes 18-20 and accompanying text.
105. Cf. Ramirez v. Jones, 683 F.2d 712, 718 (2d Cir. 1982) (Leval, J., concurring) (state court may reach the merits despite procedural default to provide guidance to lower courts), cert. denied, 460 U.S. 1016 (1983); R. Cross, supra note 19, at 41 (dictum provides guidance).
holding. One of the policies advanced in *Noia* was that imprisonment in violation of a petitioner's constitutional rights, whether or not properly presented, was intolerable.\(^{110}\) A second policy was that "conventional notions of finality in criminal litigation cannot be permitted to defeat the manifest federal policy that federal constitutional rights of personal liberty shall not be denied without the fullest opportunity for plenary federal judicial review."\(^{111}\) A related concern of the Warren Court was that federal courts are better able to protect and are more receptive to the assertion of federal rights.\(^{112}\)

These policies, however, retain little vitality in the wake of *Sykes* and subsequent habeas corpus cases. The Burger Court has consistently held that procedural defaults of federal rights should be respected absent a showing of cause and prejudice.\(^{113}\) Therefore, *Sykes* and its progeny imply that it is entirely tolerable for a petitioner to be imprisoned despite the fact that his federal claim might have produced an acquittal or a reversal if it had been properly raised.\(^{114}\) Similarly, by requiring a showing of cause and prejudice, the Burger Court has indicated that the policy of affording federal review of federal claims must be balanced against the countervailing policy of respecting valid state procedural rules.\(^{115}\) Moreover, the Burger Court has explicitly rejected the idea that state courts are less able or willing to enforce federal rights.\(^{116}\) Therefore, although applying the cause and prejudice test to alternative holdings offends the policies of *Noia*, those policies have been largely replaced, if not eviscerated, by *Sykes*.

The policies expressed by the Burger Court suggest the application of *Sykes* to alternative holdings. Under *Sykes*, the federal habeas court may no longer blithely overlook or overrule independent state procedural grounds. Accordingly, it should deny habeas review unless cause and prejudice is shown.

### III. The Problem of the Unclear Holding: Should *Sykes* Apply?

Unfortunately, state courts often fail to identify clearly the bases for

\(^{110}\) See id. at 401-02; Friendly, *supra* note 43, at 149-50; see also Sanders v. United States, 373 U.S. 1, 8 (1963) (approving policy advanced in *Noia*).

\(^{111}\) *Noia*, 372 U.S. at 424.


their decisions. In such a situation, should *Sykes* apply? Federal courts have not answered this question uniformly. For instance, the Second Circuit in *Martinez v. Harris* stated that a federal habeas court should assume that a state court's summary affirma\n
rests on the procedural ground, if the prosecutor argued procedural defe\n
This assumption mandates application of *Sykes*, which is unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, the Court in *Sykes* explicitly stated that the *Brown v. Allen* right to federal review of dispositive federal constitutional issues remained undisturbed. Under *Martinez*, this personal right may be sacrificed on the altar of systemic interests even when no such interests exist or are unclear in a particular case. The *Martiner* approach discounts the possibility that the state court's affirmance may be on the merits of the federal grounds alone, which would entitle the petitioner to federal habeas review under the rule of *Brown v. Allen*. The court's reasoning in *Martinez* allows a state court to block federal habeas review by merely affirming without opinion in any case in which the prosecution raises the issue of procedural default. This is impermissible. The *Sykes* Court's reaffirmance of the rule of *Brown v. Allen* indicates that the Court did not intend to limit habeas review so radically.

Second, the *Martinez* rule assumes that an adequate and independent state procedural ground exists whenever the prosecutor argues a procedural issue to the state court. This approach is intolerable because, in

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119. 675 F.2d 51 (2d Cir.), cert. denied, 459 U.S. 849 (1982).


124. See *supra* note 123.


the event of a summary affirmation, it allows the prosecutor to defeat the petitioner's right to federal habeas review without proving that the state court relied on a procedural ground, and that the ground was both adequate and independent.

In the recent decision of *Hawkins v. LeFevre*, the Second Circuit expressed its dissatisfaction with the *Martinez* rule and its unjust results. In *Hawkins*, the prosecutor only argued the merits and the state appellate court affirmed the conviction without opinion. On habeas review, the federal district court, citing *Martinez*, held that Hawkins was barred from habeas review due to a procedural default. In reversing the district court, the *Hawkins* court stated that "[t]he scope of . . . *Martinez* . . . does not extend to all factual situations and, in particular, does not control the instant action." Curiously, the panel could have reached the same result by merely citing *Washington v. Harris*, which provides that a federal habeas court should assume that a state court's summary affirmation of a conviction rests on constitutional grounds when the prosecutor argued solely on the merits. The *Hawkins* Court's criticism of the district court's application of *Martinez* indicates that the Second Circuit may no longer be willing to apply automatically *Martinez* whenever the prosecutor argues a procedural default to the state appellate court. Indeed the court stated "[w]e choose not to extend *Martinez* and presume reliance by a state court on a procedural default, where it appears unlikely that the court rested its affirmance on that ground." This statement may be a warning to state appellate courts to clearly identify the bases of their holdings, or risk federal habeas review. Indeed, the court cited with approval Judge Newman's concern about the *Martinez* rule:

> What concerns me about the majority's inference from state court silent affirmation is the prospect that in some future case where a procedural default is arguable, but not clear, the [state appellate court] will silently affirm after deciding that there was neither procedural default

ground for affirmation in the State's brief to the Appellate Division in order to block federal habeas review. However, the prosecutor's procedural argument may not be accurate. See, e.g., County Court v. Allen, 442 U.S. 140, 148 & n.6 (1979); Henry v. Wainwright, 686 F.2d 311, 314 (5th Cir. 1982), vacated on other grounds, 463 U.S. 1223 (1983).

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129. 758 F.2d 866 (2d Cir. 1985).
130. See id. at 872-73.
131. See id. at 870 & n.6. "The Queens County District Attorney seemingly conceded that the trial judge's actions amounted to a constitutional violation, but argued that such error was harmless." Id. at 870.
132. See id. at 870.
133. See id. at 871.
135. See id. at 451-52.
137. See id. at 872 & n.8 ("[w]e continue to urge the state courts to remove the ambiguity in their summary affirmances by indicating, with citation to [the state rules of criminal procedure] . . . , their reliance on procedural default") (citation omitted).
nor a valid claim on the merits, and we will then affirm the denial of habeas corpus relief because we mistakenly presume state court reliance on procedural default even though we think a constitutional error affecting substantial rights has occurred.\textsuperscript{138}

In the past, the Supreme Court has attempted to solve the problem presented by unclear state opinions by searching the state court records—appeal and trial—to determine whether the state courts relied on a state procedural ground.\textsuperscript{139} The major problem with this approach is that it is time-consuming\textsuperscript{140} and therefore inefficient. This is a significant problem because one of the primary purposes of limiting habeas—relieving the burden on the lower federal courts\textsuperscript{141}—is undermined by requiring federal habeas courts to search the trial and appellate records every time a state court fails to state clearly the basis of its holding.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138} Id. at 872 (quoting Edwards v. Jones, 750 F.2d 751, 757 (2d Cir. 1983) (Newman, J., concurring)).
\item \textsuperscript{140} See Batchelor v. Cupp, 693 F.2d 859, 864 (9th Cir. 1982), cert. denied, 463 U.S. 1212 (1983).
\end{itemize}

It is correctly pointed out that Sykes may not effectively relieve the burden of the lower federal courts.\textsuperscript{143} The Sykes rule may be an attempt by the Court to retain the supervisory role of the federal courts, while responding to the concerns expressed by Justice Jackson in Brown, 344 U.S. at 537-41 (Jackson, J., concurring). In that case he wrote:

\begin{quote}
[T]his Court has sanctioned progressive trivialization of the writ until floods of stale, frivolous and repetitious petitions inundate the docket of the lower courts and swell our own. Judged by our own disposition of habeas corpus matters, they have, as a class, become peculiarly undeserving. It must prejudice the occasional meritorious application to be buried in a flood of worthless ones. He who must search a haystack for a needle is likely to end up with the attitude that the needle is not worth the search. . . .

It cannot be denied that the trend of our decisions is to abandon rules of pleading or procedure which would protect the writ against abuse. . . .

. . . . It really has become necessary to plead nothing more than that the prisoner is in jail, wants to get out, and thinks it is illegal to hold him. If he fails, he may make the same plea over and over again.

Since the Constitution and laws made pursuant to it are the supreme law and since the supremacy and uniformity of federal law are attainable only by a centralized source of authority, denial by a state of a claimed federal right must give some access to the federal judicial system. But federal interference with state administration of its criminal law should not be premature and should not occur where it is not needed.
\end{quote}

Id. at 536-41 (footnotes omitted). However, when the petitioner's claim falls short of a miscarriage of justice and he cannot show good cause for his default, then his pleas, meritorious or frivolous, will not be heard. See Wainwright v. Sykes, 433 U.S. 72, 90-91 (1977); Brown v. Allen, 344 U.S. 443, 541 (1953) (Jackson, J., concurring).
A second problem is that ad hoc federal determinations of the basis of state court decisions injure the policy of comity, a doctrine which requires predictable interaction between state and federal courts. State courts should know how federal habeas courts will react to their decisions. This is impossible if a case-by-case rule of interpretation is adopted.

Finally, this approach is of limited use because it can lead to inaccurate results. For example, if a state appellate court issues an affirmance without opinion, it is impossible to determine which of several grounds asserted by the prosecution forms the basis of the appellate court's decision. Moreover, a search of the trial court record—always a time-consuming process—will be unavailing in many cases because trial courts often fail to address the issue either as a matter of procedure or on the merits. Thus, the first state court to face the issue may be an appellate court or a state habeas court. All of these reasons point to the inaccuracy inherent in this approach. Inaccurate results are intolerable when an individual's liberty is at stake. In addition, such inaccuracies thwart the policy of comity which the Burger Court has so zealously guarded.

A third approach to the problem of unclear state holdings—one which avoids unduly burdening the federal courts—is for the federal habeas court to assume that the state appellate court relied on federal law whenever the basis of the state court's opinion is unclear. This would pro-

144. See id.
146. See supra note 117.
149. See Townsend v. Sain, 372 U.S. 293, 312-13 (1963); see also 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)(2), (3), (6), (8) (1982). One of the policies of Sykes is to promote accuracy of results at trial. See supra notes 96-97 and accompanying text. It would be ironic if the accuracy promoted by the Sykes limit on habeas review was then subverted by the application of Sykes by the federal habeas courts to murky state court determinations.
151. See supra notes 91-93 and accompanying text.
152. See White v. Estelle, 720 F.2d 415, 418 (5th Cir. 1983) (assuming state court held on the merits); Williams v. Zahradnick, 632 F.2d 353, 359 & n.6, 360 (4th Cir. 1980)
tect the petitioner's right under *Brown v. Allen*\(^{153}\) to federal review, while avoiding undue burden on the lower federal courts.\(^{154}\) This approach would also produce consistent results by avoiding ad hoc interpretations of state court opinions.\(^{155}\) Finally, this method is supported by the Supreme Court's decision in *Michigan v. Long*.\(^{156}\)

In *Long*, the Court on direct review confronted the problem of determining the basis of a state court's holding.\(^{157}\) One basis for the state court's holding could have been an adequate and independent state ground, but the other could have been federal.\(^{158}\) The Supreme Court held that review is not barred unless the state court includes "a 'plain statement' that a decision rests upon adequate and independent state grounds."\(^{159}\) This rule assumes that there are no adequate and independent state grounds "when it is not clear from the opinion itself that the state court relied upon an adequate and independent state ground and when it fairly appears that the state court rested its decision primarily on federal law."\(^{160}\) *Long* held that when it is not clear that adequate and independent state grounds support the judgment, the Supreme Court on direct appeal will assume that none exist.\(^{161}\) Federal habeas courts should assume the same.

Arguably, applying the plain statement rule to state court opinions in the context of habeas review would allow the prisoner to obtain habeas review any time he merely asserted a federal claim. This argument is unpersuasive because it ignores the fact that if a valid state procedural ground exists and the state court's opinion clearly rests on that ground, the petitioner cannot secure habeas review by asserting a federal issue.\(^{162}\) Requiring state courts to make a plain statement is a slight burden considering the prisoner's interest in securing federal habeas review.\(^{163}\) A plain statement may be cursory; it does not require an in-depth written analysis.\(^{164}\) Thus, the compromise of the state interest is slight in com-

\(^{153}\) 344 U.S. 443 (1953).
\(^{154}\) See *supra* notes 140-41, *infra* notes 163-65 and accompanying text.
\(^{156}\) 463 U.S. 1032 (1983).
\(^{157}\) See *id.* at 1037.
\(^{158}\) See *id.*. The state court could have held on either state constitutional grounds or federal constitutional grounds on the issue of whether a search of defendant's car was illegal. *Id.* at 1043-44.
\(^{159}\) *Id.* at 1042.
\(^{160}\) *Id.* (footnote omitted).
\(^{161}\) *See id.*
\(^{164}\) See Hawkins v. LeFevre, 758 F.2d 866, 872 (2d Cir. 1985); Edwards v. Jones, 720
parison to the total compromise of the prisoner's rights if another rule were adopted.\textsuperscript{165}

Moreover, the state court is the controlling actor in this scenario. It has complete control over the content of its opinion,\textsuperscript{166} and the content determines whether the Sykes cause and prejudice standard applies.\textsuperscript{167} Therefore, the state court, by drafting an opinion with a plain statement, can determine whether federal habeas review will be freely given; the prisoner does not have that control. If the state court does not clearly indicate the basis for its holding, the doubt should be resolved against the state—the controlling actor—and Sykes should not apply.\textsuperscript{168}

Finally, applying Long's plain statement rule to habeas review does not unduly offend the systemic policies of Sykes. Under the plain statement rule the policies of finality and efficiency would be harmed only when the basis of the state court's opinion is ambiguous.\textsuperscript{169} When a state court clearly indicates that its decision is based on adequate and independent state grounds, federal review would be unavailable absent a demonstra-

\textsuperscript{165} See L. Yackle, supra note 3, § 84, at 143 (Cum. Supp. 1985).

\textsuperscript{166} See id.

\textsuperscript{167} If the rationale is solely federal, then Sykes does not apply. See supra notes 52-57 and accompanying text. If the decision is based alternatively on federal and state grounds, Sykes should apply, though some circuits do not apply Sykes in this case. See supra notes 15-17, 58-116 and accompanying text. If the state ground is the sole basis, then Sykes applies. See supra notes 33-51 and accompanying text.


It is fundamental that state courts be left free and unfettered by us in interpreting their state constitutions. But it is equally important that ambiguous or obscure adjudications by state courts do not stand as barriers to a determination by this Court of the validity under the federal constitution of state action. Intelligent exercise of our appellate powers compels us to ask for the elimination of the obscurities and ambiguities from the opinions in such cases. . . . For no other course assures that important federal issues . . . will reach this Court for adjudication; that state courts will not be the final arbiters of important issues under the federal constitution; and that we will not encroach on the constitutional jurisdiction of the states.

tion of cause and prejudice. Further, to avoid federal habeas review, a state court need only briefly state in its opinion the adequate and independent state grounds. Although it can be argued that placing requirements on the drafting of state courts' opinions offends comity, in these circumstances the offense is minimal. In the case of an unclear holding, the state court is asked to say more. It is not constrained from discussing federal law. Thus, applying Long to unclear holdings would not offend comity to the same extent that not applying Sykes to alternative holdings would.

In Long, the Supreme Court discussed the effect of the plain statement rule on comity. First, the Court emphasized the problems presented when a reviewing court determines ad hoc whether a decision was based on adequate and independent state grounds. The Court viewed that method as "antithetical to the doctrinal consistency that is required when sensitive issues of federal-state relations are involved." The Court then stated that the plain statement approach "provide[s] state judges with a clearer opportunity to develop state jurisprudence unimpeded by federal interference, and yet will preserve the integrity of federal law...[It is important] that ambiguous or obscure adjudications by state courts do not stand as barriers to a determination by [the Supreme Court] of the validity under the federal constitution of state action." Thus the Court indicated that the plain statement rule might actually promote rather than offend comity.

Because the alternatives to applying the plain statement rule to habeas corpus review are to accept ad hoc determinations by reviewing courts or to assume that the claim is procedurally barred, any injury to comity arising from applying Long to unclear state holdings is tolerable. Although more friction may arise from applying Long in the habeas context than on direct review, this merely reflects the fact that habeas review by its very nature creates friction between federal and state courts. Further, applying Long to unclear holdings furthers Brown v. Allen's protection of state prisoners against violations of their federal rights by the states. Finally, although applying Long to habeas review may com-

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170. See supra note 24 and accompanying text; cf. Long, 463 U.S. at 1043-44 (rule applied in context of direct review).
171. See supra note 164 and accompanying text.
172. See supra notes 142-44 and accompanying text.
174. Id.
175. Id. at 1041 (quoting Minnesota v. National Tea Co., 309 U.S. 551, 557 (1940)).
176. See supra notes 139-51 and accompanying text.
177. See supra notes 120-28 and accompanying text.
180. See supra notes 122-27 and accompanying text.
promise comity slightly, it also furthers comity since it is a consistent and predictable approach.

CONCLUSION

The Sykes cause and prejudice standard should be applied whenever a state court, solely or alternatively, relies on a procedural ground that constitutes an adequate and independent state ground. If the state court does not rely on a state ground, free habeas review as guaranteed by Brown v. Allen should be granted. When the basis of the state conviction is unclear, the federal court should apply the plain statement rule established by the Court in Michigan v. Long. When it is not clear that adequate and independent state grounds support the conviction, the federal habeas court should assume none exist and therefore grant habeas review.

These rules further the systemic policies enunciated by the Court in Sykes. Although applying Long to habeas review might slightly increase federal-state friction, this is tolerable. If Long is not applied to unclear holdings, the alternatives are to accept ad hoc determinations by reviewing courts, which can lead to even greater friction between the two court systems, or risk sacrificing the state prisoner's right to federal adjudication of his federal claim even though that claim is not barred by an adequate and independent state procedural ground.

James W. Dobbins