

**In the Supreme Court of the State of California**

SEP 24 2018

Jorge Navarrete Clerk

**THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF  
CALIFORNIA,**

**Plaintiff and Respondent,**

**v.**

**YAZAN ALEDAMAT,**

**Defendant and Appellant.**

Case No. S248105

Deputy

Second Appellate District, Division Two, Case No. B282911  
Los Angeles County Superior Court, Case No. BA451225  
The Honorable Stephen A. Marcus, Judge

**OPENING BRIEF ON THE MERITS**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
Issues presented .....	7
Introduction .....	7
Statement of the case and facts.....	8
Argument.....	12
I.    Alternative-legal-theory error is subject to the ordinary <i>Chapman</i> standard of harmless-error review.....	12
A.    The origins of the <i>Green</i> rule and its application to alternative-legal-theory error .....	12
B.    This Court and the United States Supreme Court have retreated from rigid harmless standards such as the <i>Green</i> rule.....	16
C.    Application of <i>Green</i> as the exclusive test in cases of alternative-legal-theory error is incompatible with modern harmless-error precedent .....	21
II.   The alternative-legal-theory error in this case was harmless .....	27
A.    Factual background.....	27
B.    The error was harmless under <i>Chapman</i> .....	29
C.    The error would not be harmless under <i>Green</i> .....	32
Conclusion.....	33

## TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	Page
<b>CASES</b>	
<i>Bereano v. United States</i> (4th Cir. 2013) 706 F.3d 568 .....	20, 23
<i>Brecht v. Abrahamson</i> (1993) 507 U.S. 619 .....	20, 22
<i>California v. Roy</i> (1996) 519 U.S. 2 ( <i>per curiam</i> ).....	19, 23
<i>Carella v. California</i> (1989) 491 U.S. 263 .....	19
<i>Chapman v. California</i> (1967) 386 U.S. 18 .....	<i>passim</i>
<i>Griffin v. United States</i> (1991) 502 U.S. 46 .....	13
<i>Hedgpeth v. Pulido</i> (2008) 555 U.S. 57 ( <i>per curiam</i> ).....	<i>passim</i>
<i>In re D.T.</i> (2015) 237 Cal.App.4th 693 .....	30
<i>In re Martinez</i> (2017) 3 Cal.5th 1216.....	15
<i>Neder v. United States</i> (1999) 527 U.S. 1 .....	<i>passim</i>
<i>People v. Aguilar</i> (1997) 16 Cal.4th 1023 .....	11, 30
<i>People v. Aranda</i> (2012) 55 Cal.4th 342 .....	24
<i>People v. Breverman</i> (1998) 19 Cal.4th 142 .....	<i>passim</i>

**TABLE OF AUTHORITIES**  
**(continued)**

	<b>Page</b>
<i>People v. Brooks</i> (2017) 3 Cal.5th 1.....	12
<i>People v. Brown</i> (2012) 210 Cal.App.4th 1 .....	12, 16, 31, 32
<i>People v. Cahill</i> (1993) 5 Cal.4th 478.....	27
<i>People v. Chiu</i> (2014) 59 Cal.4th 155.....	14, 15
<i>People v. Chun</i> (2009) 45 Cal.4th 1172.....	14
<i>People v. Cross</i> (2008) 45 Cal.4th 58.....	14, 24, 25
<i>People v. Flood</i> (1998) 18 Cal.4th 470.....	<i>passim</i>
<i>People v. Graham</i> (1969) 71 Cal.2d 303.....	30
<i>People v. Green</i> (1980) 27 Cal.3d 1.....	<i>passim</i>
<i>People v. Guiton</i> (1993) 4 Cal.4th 1116.....	<i>passim</i>
<i>People v. Harris</i> (1994) 9 Cal.4th 407.....	16, 17, 26
<i>People v. McCoy</i> (1944) 25 Cal.2d 177.....	11, 31
<i>People v. Merritt</i> (2017) 2 Cal. 5th 819.....	<i>passim</i>

**TABLE OF AUTHORITIES**  
**(continued)**

	<b>Page</b>
<i>People v. Mil</i> (2012) 53 Cal.4th 400.....	<i>passim</i>
<i>People v. Modesto</i> (1963) 59 Cal.2d 722.....	18
<i>People v. Nelson</i> (2016) 1 Cal.5th 513.....	11
<i>People v. Page</i> (2004) 123 Cal.App.4th 1466.....	31
<i>People v. Pulido</i> (1997) 15 Cal.4th 713.....	22
<i>People v. Ray</i> (1975) 14 Cal.3d 20.....	30
<i>People v. Sanchez</i> (2001) 86 Cal.App.4th 970.....	15, 16
<i>People v. Sedeno</i> (1974) 10 Cal.3d 703.....	18, 22
<i>People v. Simons</i> (1996) 42 Cal.App.4th 1100.....	31
<i>People v. Watson</i> (1956) 46 Cal.2d 818.....	19, 25
<i>Pope v. Illinois</i> (1987) 481 U.S. 497.....	19
<i>Rose v. Clark</i> (1986) 478 U.S. 570.....	26
<i>Skilling v. United States</i> (2010) 561 U.S. 358.....	20, 22

**TABLE OF AUTHORITIES**  
**(continued)**

	<b>Page</b>
<i>United States v. Black</i> (7th Cir. 2010) 625 F.3d 386 .....	20, 23
<i>United States v. Garrido</i> (9th Cir. 2013) 713 F.3d 985 .....	20, 23
<i>United States v. Skilling</i> (5th Cir. 2011) 638 F.3d 480 .....	20, 23, 25
<i>Yates v. Evatt</i> (1991) 500 U.S. 391 .....	17
 <b>STATUTES</b>	
Pen. Code	
§ 245 .....	11
§ 245, subd. (a).....	8
§ 422, subd. (a).....	8
§ 667, subd. (a)(1) .....	10
§ 667 subds. (b)-(f).....	10
§ 12022, subd. (b)(1) .....	8
 <b>CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS</b>	
California Constitution.....	25
California Constitution, Article VI, § 13 .....	17, 25
Federal Constitution.....	25
 <b>OTHER AUTHORITIES</b>	
CALCRIM No. 875 .....	9, 11, 12, 32
CALCRIM No. 3145 .....	10, 11
CALCRIM Nos. 875, 3145 .....	30

## ISSUES PRESENTED

1. Is an error in instructing the jury on both a legally correct theory of guilt and a legally incorrect one harmless if an examination of the record permits a reviewing court to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the jury based its verdict on the valid theory, or is the error harmless only if the record affirmatively demonstrates that the jury actually rested its verdict on the legally correct theory?

2. Could the jury, in this case, have concluded that defendant used an inherently deadly weapon in committing the assault without also concluding that defendant used a weapon in a manner that presents a risk of death or great bodily injury?

## INTRODUCTION

The Court of Appeal below held that where there is error in offering the jury both a valid and an invalid theory of conviction—so-called “alternative-legal-theory error”—the judgment must be reversed unless the record shows that the jury necessarily relied on the valid theory. It concluded that this rule of near-automatic reversal, derived from *People v. Green* (1980) 27 Cal.3d 1, controls even though the error would “certainly” not be reversible under ordinary harmless review. But the *Green* rule is only one way a court may determine that alternative-legal-theory error is harmless. Using *Green* as the exclusive test is incompatible with more recent decisions of this Court and the United States Supreme Court.

To forestall further decisions like the one below, this Court should now clarify that the ordinary harmless review standard of *Chapman v. California* (1967) 386 U.S. 18, 22-23, governs alternative-legal-theory error. Under that standard, a court may affirm if it concludes beyond a reasonable doubt that the error did not contribute to the verdict. There is no persuasive reason why any higher standard should apply in these

circumstances. Nothing about the nature of the error calls for a different or more demanding standard than *Chapman*, which applies to a variety of similar instructional errors. Nor does our state Constitution independently require any more stringent standard of reversibility. The use of *Chapman* in this context would also advance the proper role of appellate review by preserving judgments where, as here, the error could not have affected the outcome of the trial.

### STATEMENT OF THE CASE AND FACTS

Defendant Yazan Aledamat was tried in the Los Angeles County Superior Court for assault with a deadly weapon (Pen. Code, § 245, subd. (a)) and making a criminal threat (Pen. Code, § 422, subd. (a)), with an enhancement allegation as to the threat charge that he had used a deadly and dangerous weapon (Pen. Code, § 12022, subd. (b)(1)). (CT 20-24, 47-48.) The evidence showed that Aledamat frequented a food truck where Yuridia Gonzalez and her husband, Francisco Bautista, worked. (RT 326-329, 331-332, 334, 336.) Aledamat sometimes commented on Gonzalez's attractiveness, and had asked for her phone number, but Gonzalez had rebuffed him. (RT 327-329.) On a day when Gonzalez was absent but Bautista was working, Aledamat made provocative comments about Gonzalez. (RT 334, 336-339, 346-347, 350-352, 383.) Bautista took off his apron and turned around to face Aledamat. (RT 352-353.) In response, Aledamat pulled out a box cutter with its blade exposed, thrust it toward Bautista, and said "I'm going to kill you." (RT 339-344, 353-354, 360, 381-382, 384.) Police officers arrived and saw Aledamat holding the box-cutter out toward Bautista. (RT 343-344, 354, 359, 366-368, 371, 373-377, 380.) Aledamat put the box cutter in his pocket; the officers arrested him and recovered the weapon. (RT 368, 371-372.)



After the close of evidence, the court read the jury the standard CALCRIM instructions on, among other things, the elements of the assault charge:

To prove that the defendant is guilty of this crime, the People must prove that:

The defendant did an act with a deadly weapon other than a firearm, that by its nature would directly and probably result in the application of force to sa[id] person;

The defendant did that act willfully;

When the defendant acted, he was aware of the facts that would lead a reasonable person to realize that his act by its nature would directly and probably result in the application of force to someone, and

When the defendant acted, he had the present ability to apply force with a deadly weapon other than a firearm to a person.

(RT 632-633; see CT 58; CALCRIM No. 875.)

The court then read several elaborating instructions, including instructions defining the term “deadly weapon”:

A deadly weapon other than a firearm is any object, instrument, or weapon that is inherently deadly or one that is used in such a way that it is capable of causing and likely to cause death or ... great bodily injury.

...

Great bodily injury means significant or substantial physical injury. It is an injury that is greater than minor or moderate harm.

(RT 634-635; see CT 58; CALCRIM No. 875.)

The court also read the jury the standard instruction on the weapon enhancement allegation:

If you find the defendant guilty of the crimes charged in counts 1 and 2, you must then decide whether for each crime the People have proved the additional allegation that the defendant

personally used a deadly or dangerous weapon during the commission of that crime.

...

A deadly or dangerous weapon is any object, instrument, or weapon that is inherently dangerous ... or one that is used in such a way that it is capable of causing or likely to cause death or great bodily injury.

In deciding whether an object is a deadly weapon, consider all of the surrounding circumstances including when and where the object was possessed and any other evidence that indicates whether the object would be used for a dangerous rather than a harmless purpose.

“Great bodily injury” means significant or substantial physical injury. It is an injury that is greater than minor or moderate harm.

Someone personally uses a deadly or dangerous weapon if he or she intentionally ... displays the weapon in a menacing manner.

(RT 637-638; see CT 59-60; CALCRIM No. 3145.)

Aledamat’s counsel defended against the assault charge by arguing that there was at least reasonable doubt that his act of wielding the box cutter probably would have resulted in the application of force; counsel did not contest that the box cutter itself qualified as a deadly weapon. (RT 643-649.) As to the threats charge, defense counsel argued that reasonable doubt existed about whether Aledamat actually made the threat and whether Bautista was in sustained fear as the result of any threat. (RT 649-659.)

The jury convicted Aledamat of both charges and found the enhancement allegation true. (RT 682-683; CT 64-69.) Aledamat admitted that he had previously been convicted of robbery (see Pen. Code, §§ 667, subd. (a)(1), 667 subds. (b)-(f)), and the court sentenced him to 11 years in state prison (RT 672-676, 904; CT 67, 75-79).

On appeal, Aledamat claimed that the standard instructions as to the assault charge and the weapon-use allegation gave rise to alternative-legal-theory error. The Court of Appeal agreed. (Opn. 4-5.) A “deadly weapon” for purposes of Penal Code section 245 is “any object, instrument, or weapon which is used in such a manner as to be capable of producing and likely to produce, death or great bodily injury.” (*People v. Aguilar* (1997) 16 Cal.4th 1023, 1028-1029.) And an “inherently deadly weapon” is simply an object—such as a gun, dirk, or blackjack—that is deadly to others in the “ordinary use” for which it is designed. (*Id.* at p. 1029.) A box cutter, as a matter of law, is not inherently deadly. (*People v. McCoy* (1944) 25 Cal.2d 177, 188.) Because the instructions permitted the jury to conclude that the box cutter was a deadly weapon if it was “inherently deadly,” and no other definition of that term was provided (RT 634-635; see CT 58; CALCRIM No. 875; see also RT 637-638; CT 59-60; CALCRIM No. 3145), the Court of Appeal concluded that the jury was permitted to reach its verdict on the basis of either a legally valid theory or a legally invalid theory (see opn. 4-5; see also *People v. Nelson* (2016) 1 Cal.5th 513, 546-547 [instructional language is erroneous if it is reasonably likely to have misled the jury]).

Relying on *People v. Guiton* (1993) 4 Cal.4th 1116, 1129, the Court of Appeal held that reversal was required because alternative-legal-theory error can be deemed harmless only if the record shows that the jury actually and necessarily relied on the legally valid theory, a showing not supported by the record here. (Opn. 5-6.) The Court of Appeal observed, however, that “the rules regarding prejudice that we apply in this case are arguably in tension with more recent cases, such as *People v. Merritt* (2017) 2 Cal. 5th 819.” (Opn. 6.) And it concluded that an ordinary harmless-beyond-a-reasonable-doubt standard “would certainly be satisfied here” since it was uncontested and shown by overwhelming evidence that the box cutter

qualified as a deadly weapon. (Opn. 6-7.) But it determined that any reconsideration of the proper standard “is for our Supreme Court, not us.” (Opn. 7.)

## ARGUMENT

### I. ALTERNATIVE-LEGAL-THEORY ERROR IS SUBJECT TO THE ORDINARY *CHAPMAN* STANDARD OF HARMLESS-ERROR REVIEW

The Court of Appeal below properly concluded that there was alternative-legal-theory error here, since the jury was given both a valid and an invalid path to conviction. (Opn. 4-5; *ante*, p. 8; see *People v. Brown* (2012) 210 Cal.App.4th 1, 11 [CALCRIM No. 875 presents jury with alternative-legal-theory error].) The rule of near-automatic reversal that the court followed, however, should not apply in these circumstances. Had the trial court erroneously instructed the jury only that the box-cutter was an inherently deadly weapon, it is beyond dispute that the error would have been reviewable for harmlessness under the ordinary *Chapman* standard. (*People v. Brooks* (2017) 3 Cal.5th 1, 69-70 [misdescription of an element of the offense subject to harmless-error review under *Chapman*].) But because the trial court also instructed the jury with the correct definition of “deadly weapon,” the Court of Appeal used a more stringent harmless-error test. As the Court of Appeal observed, this approach is “arguably in tension with more recent cases.” (Opn. 6.) In fact, the harmlessness standard applied by the Court of Appeal is incompatible with modern harmless-error decisions, which compel application of the ordinary *Chapman* standard.

#### A. The Origins of the *Green* Rule and Its Application to Alternative-Legal-Theory Error

The standard of reversal used by the Court of Appeal originates with *People v. Green* (1980) 27 Cal.3d 1. In *Green*, this Court held that “when

the prosecution presents its case to the jury on alternate theories, some of which are legally correct and others legally incorrect, and the reviewing court cannot determine from the record on which theory the ensuing general verdict of guilt rested, the conviction cannot stand.” (*Id.* at p. 69.)

Several years later, in *People v. Guiton* (1993) 4 Cal.4th 1116, the Court re-evaluated that rule in light of the United States Supreme Court’s intervening decision in *Griffin v. United States* (1991) 502 U.S. 46. *Griffin* held that, where alternative theories of conviction have been presented to the jury, a general verdict will not be set aside on grounds of factual insufficiency if there is at least one factual theory supported by the record. (*Griffin, supra*, 502 U.S. at pp. 56-57.) While acknowledging that the *Griffin* rule did not bind the States, this Court in *Guiton* concluded that the rule “makes good sense.” (*Guiton, supra*, 4 Cal.4th at p. 1129.) It held that, for purposes of California law, when an alternative theory of guilt is factually deficient, as opposed to legally invalid, reversal is not required unless the record affirmatively shows that the jury relied on the factually unsupported theory. (*Ibid.*) The Court went on to observe that it was not called upon to “decide the exact standard of review of cases governed by *Green*,” i.e., cases in which the alternative theory is legally invalid. (*Id.* at p. 1130.) But it noted that “one way” of assessing harmless error in that situation is to “determine from other portions of the verdict that the jury necessarily found the defendant guilty on a proper theory.” (*Ibid.*) The Court concluded that there “may be additional ways by which a court can determine that error in the *Green* situation is harmless. We leave the question to future cases.” (*Id.* at p. 1131.)

Subsequent decisions of this Court have not squarely addressed or settled the open question recognized in *Guiton*. Some 15 years after that case was decided, Justice Baxter emphasized that *Guiton*’s approach was only one way to determine harmless error in cases of alternative-legal-theory

error and that the Court had “never intimated that this was the only way to do so.” (*People v. Cross* (2008) 45 Cal.4th 58, 70 (conc. opn. of Baxter, J.)) He posited that the ordinary harmless-error standard of *Chapman v. California* (1967) 386 U.S. 18, should apply. (*Cross, supra*, 45 Cal.4th at pp. 70-71 (conc. opn. of Baxter, J.)) That standard differs markedly from the one described in *Green* and *Guiton*. Under the *Chapman* standard, which applies to most federal constitutional errors, including most instructional errors, a reviewing court must undertake “a thorough examination of the record” to determine whether it is “clear beyond a reasonable doubt that a rational jury would have found the defendant guilty absent the error.” (*Neder v. United States* (1999) 527 U.S. 1, 18, 19.) For example, *Chapman* permits affirmance where an element of the offense has been omitted from the instructions if “the omitted element was uncontested and supported by overwhelming evidence.” (*Id.* at p. 17; accord, *People v. Mil* (2012) 53 Cal.4th 400, 410.)

Shortly after Justice Baxter made those observations, the Court acknowledged the still-open question in *People v. Chun* (2009) 45 Cal.4th 1172, but again declined to resolve it. It instead concluded that the alternative-legal-theory error in that case could be deemed harmless by asking whether “other aspects of the verdict or evidence leave no reasonable doubt that the jury made the findings necessary” to support the valid theory. (*Id.* at pp. 1204-1205.) The Court noted that it used that test “without holding that this is the only way to find error harmless.” (*Ibid.*)

This Court’s more recent decisions, while not directly taking on the unresolved issue, suggest that a harmless standard broader than the *Green* rule may apply to alternative-legal-theory error. In *People v. Chiu* (2014) 59 Cal.4th 155, the Court said that a conviction “must be reversed unless we conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the jury based its verdict on the legally valid theory.” (*Id.* at p. 167, citing *Chun, supra*, 45

Cal.4th at pp. 1201, 1203-1205.) In applying that standard, the Court did not limit its inquiry to “portions of the verdict” alone but determined that, in light of the jury’s questions during deliberations, “we cannot conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the jury ultimately based its first degree murder verdict on ... the legally valid theory ....” (*Chiu, supra*, 59 Cal.4th at pp. 167-168.) Similarly, in *In re Martinez* (2017) 3 Cal.5th 1216, the Court recited “the *Chiu* prejudice standard” that governs alternative-legal-theory error but did not expressly grapple with the scope of the harmlessness inquiry. (*Id.* at pp. 1225, 1226.) In applying the standard, the Court reviewed the record in the case, including the evidence presented to the jury and the jury’s questions during deliberations, before concluding that that review did not “show beyond a reasonable doubt that the jury relied on a legally valid theory.” (*Id.* at pp. 1226-1227.)<sup>1</sup>

Lower courts have taken different approaches to harmless-error review in this situation. The Court of Appeal below, for example, believed that it was not permitted to affirm unless the record established that the jury necessarily relied on the valid theory. The court therefore reversed, even though it would have concluded that the error was harmless under an ordinary *Chapman* test, since the evidence in support of the valid theory was uncontested and overwhelming. (Opn. 6-7.) Likewise, in *People v. Sanchez* (2001) 86 Cal.App.4th 970, the court reversed for alternative-

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<sup>1</sup> The central issue in *Martinez* was whether a more relaxed harmlessness standard should apply to alternative-legal-theory error on collateral review. (See *Martinez, supra*, 3 Cal.5th at p. 1221.) The Court rejected that proposition and instead applied the standard articulated in *Chiu*. (*Id.* at 1225.) In the briefs, the People had argued, among other things, that it would be appropriate to review the entire record in determining prejudice, but that argument did not draw comment other than the observation that “[t]he Attorney General’s position, like the Court of Appeal’s, is based on its review of the evidence.” (*Id.* at p. 1226.)

legal-theory error, despite “overwhelming evidence” in support of the legally valid theory. (*Id.* at p. 981.) It did so because “there simply is no legitimate basis in the record” to conclude that the verdict was necessarily based on the legally correct theory and it was “conceivable” that the jury might have relied on the incorrect theory. (*Ibid.*) On the other hand, the Court of Appeal in *Brown*, *supra*, 210 Cal.App.4th 1, affirmed despite alternative-legal-theory error, reasoning that the “ample evidence” produced at trial in favor of the valid theory, along with the arguments of counsel, left no reasonable doubt that the jury found the defendant guilty on the valid theory. (*Id.* at p. 13.)

This Court should now clarify whatever lingering ambiguity produced these disparate results. The ultimate inquiry in this context should be no different from the *Chapman* harmless-error standard customarily applied to instructional error affecting the elements of an offense. Under that standard, a reviewing court may affirm if it appears beyond a reasonable doubt that the error did not affect the verdict, even if the record does not show that the jury necessarily relied on the valid theory.

**B. This Court and the United States Supreme Court Have Retreated from Rigid Harmlessness Standards Such as the *Green* Rule**

The *Green* rule is a conspicuous outlier when it comes to assessing the harmlessness of an instructional error. Since *Green* and *Guiton* were decided, this Court and the United States Supreme Court have addressed the proper harmlessness standard to be applied in various instructional contexts and have consistently rejected such rules of automatic or near-automatic reversal.

In *People v. Harris* (1994) 9 Cal.4th 407, for example, this Court decided that instructional error in misdescribing the “immediate presence” aspect of robbery is not subject to the standard of reversibility set forth in



*Green*. (*Id.* at pp. 416-419.) Instead, the Court concluded, it is governed by “the harmless error test traditionally applied to misinstruction on the elements of an offense, namely, whether it appears ‘beyond a reasonable doubt that the error complained of did not contribute to the verdict obtained.’” (*Id.* at pp. 425, quoting *Chapman, supra*, 386 U.S. at p. 24.) The Court noted that, when it decided *Green*, it did not have the benefit of subsequent United States Supreme Court authority applying *Chapman* to similar instructional error. (*Ibid.*, discussing *Yates v. Evatt* (1991) 500 U.S. 391.)

In *People v. Flood* (1998) 18 Cal.4th 470, this Court re-examined the proper harmless standard to be applied to the erroneous omission of an element of the offense from the jury instructions. The Court observed that state and federal jurisprudence on the subject had been evolving for some decades. (*Id.* at pp. 480, 492.) In light of that evolution, it rejected the existing state-law rule, which required automatic reversal subject to various exceptions, such as one that, like the *Green* standard, permitted affirmance where the jury necessarily resolved the omitted question under other, proper instructions. (*Id.* at pp. 479-490.) The Court declined to perpetuate “an ostensible reversible-per-se rule that is riddled with exceptions meant to delineate circumstances in which such instructional error categorically may be deemed harmless.” (*Id.* at p. 490.) It observed that such a rule “is fundamentally inconsistent with the language and purpose of the specific California constitutional harmless error provision.” (*Ibid.*) And the Court held that “the prejudicial effect of such error is to be determined, *for purposes of California law*, under the generally applicable prejudicial error test embodied in article VI, section 13.” (*Ibid.*)

Having determined that such error is not automatically reversible under California law, the *Flood* Court went on to hold that, for purposes of federal law, the *Chapman* standard controls. (*Flood, supra*, 18 Cal.4th at

pp. 502-503.) It reasoned that recent United States Supreme Court precedent showed “that instructional errors—whether misdescriptions, omissions, or presumptions—as a general matter fall within the broad category of trial errors subject to *Chapman* review on direct appeal.” (*Id.* at p. 499.) The Court rejected the argument that such an error could be deemed harmless only if “the jury necessarily found the omitted element in connection with other findings required by the instructions.” (*Id.* at p. 506.) It noted that none of the authority offered in support of that rule “involved a misinstruction on a peripheral issue that was never actually in dispute at trial and on which the evidence was totally uncontradicted.” (*Id.* at pp. 506-507.) And the Court concluded that federal authority indicated, to the contrary, “that such an error may be found harmless in circumstances, such as those presented in the case at bar, in which there is no possibility that the error affected the result.” (*Id.* at p. 507.)

In *People v. Breverman* (1998) 19 Cal.4th 142, this Court similarly re-examined the proper harmless standard to be applied to the erroneous omission of lesser-included-offense instructions. Like the error in *Flood*, such error had been deemed reversible per se under state law unless the jury necessarily resolved the omitted issue pursuant to other, proper instructions—a rule the Court characterized as a “standard of near-automatic reversal.” (*Id.* at p. 175.) That standard traced back to *People v. Seden* (1974) 10 Cal.3d 703—decided just a few years before *Green* would announce a parallel rule—in which the Court had slightly relaxed the governing reversal-per-se standard. (*Id.* at pp. 720-722, modifying *People v. Modesto* (1963) 59 Cal.2d 722, 731.) Building on *Flood* and other decisions, the Court in *Breverman* concluded that *Seden*’s “rigid” standard was incompatible with California’s constitutional harmless-error provision. (*Breverman, supra*, 19 Cal.4th at p. 176, citing Cal. Const., art. VI, § 13.) Since the error “can readily be assessed by an individualized, concrete

examination of the record,” it “must therefore be evaluated under the generally applicable California test for harmless error.” (*Ibid.*) And because the Court determined that the error did not violate federal law, the harmless standard mandated by our State Constitution in that context was the reasonable-probability test of *People v. Watson* (1956) 46 Cal.2d 818, 836. (*Breverman, supra*, 19 Cal.4th at pp. 172, 176.)

The United States Supreme Court in *Neder* later confirmed *Flood*'s conclusion that instructional error in omitting an element of the offense is not reversible per se but is subject to harmless-error review under *Chapman*. (*Neder, supra*, 527 U.S. at pp. 8-15.) The Court reasoned that such an error does not affect the framework within which the trial proceeds, so as to amount to a structural defect that would defy harmless analysis. (*Id.* at pp. 8-9.) Instead, it is akin to errors like the misdescription of an element or an impermissible conclusive presumption, both of which the Court had previously determined were subject to harmless-error review. (*Id.* at pp 12-13, discussing, among other cases, *California v. Roy* (1996) 519 U.S. 2 (*per curiam*), *Carella v. California* (1989) 491 U.S. 263, and *Pope v. Illinois* (1987) 481 U.S. 497.) Like this Court in *Flood*, the *Neder* Court rejected the proposition that the omission of an element should be deemed harmless only if it can be determined that the jury necessarily “rested its verdict on evidence that its instructions allowed it to consider.” (*Id.* at p. 17.) The Court determined that such an approach would conflict with the test applied in other, similar situations, and concluded that “the harmless-error inquiry must be essentially the same: Is it clear beyond a reasonable doubt that a rational jury would have found the defendant guilty absent the error?” (*Id.* at p. 17-18.)

Several years later, in *Hedgpeth v. Pulido* (2008) 555 U.S. 57 (*per curiam*), the high court examined the same type of error at issue in this case, where the jury was given an alternative but legally invalid path to

conviction, and decided that such error is not structural but is instead subject to review for harmlessness. (*Id.* at pp. 61-62.) Because that case arose on collateral review, the Court held that the harmlessness test of *Brecht v. Abrahamson* (1993) 507 U.S. 619, 623, applied, and it had no occasion to expressly say what harmlessness standard would govern on direct review. (*Ibid.*) In deciding that the error was not reversible per se, however, the Court relied heavily on its post-*Chapman* jurisprudence, which had found various instructional errors subject to the beyond-a-reasonable-doubt harmlessness standard. (*Id.* at pp. 60-61.) It concluded that “nothing ... suggests that a different standard should apply in this context.” (*Id.* at p. 61.) The Court also criticized the standard used by the federal court of appeals in that case, which required reversal unless the reviewing court could say with “absolute certainty” that the defendant had been convicted on the basis of the legally valid theory. (*Id.* at pp. 59-60, 62.) Application of a more stringent standard would be “patently illogical,” the Court observed, as it “reduces to the strange claim that, because the jury received both a ‘good’ charge and a ‘bad’ charge on the issue, the error was somehow more pernicious than where the *only* charge on the critical issue was a mistaken one.” (*Id.* at p. 61, citation and internal quotation marks and alterations omitted.)

In *Skilling v. United States* (2010) 561 U.S. 358, the Court later recognized that alternative-legal-theory error is reviewed for harmlessness on direct appeal, but it did not specifically articulate the applicable standard. (*Id.* at p. 414 & fn. 46.) Lower federal courts after *Pulido* and *Skilling* have applied *Chapman* to alternative-legal-theory error. (See *United States v. Garrido* (9th Cir. 2013) 713 F.3d 985, 994; *Bereano v. United States* (4th Cir. 2013) 706 F.3d 568, 578; *United States v. Skilling* (5th Cir. 2011) 638 F.3d 480, 481-482; *United States v. Black* (7th Cir. 2010) 625 F.3d 386, 388.)

This Court has also more recently concluded that instructional error involving the omission of multiple elements of a charged offense—even all elements of the offense—is not structural but is amenable to harmless review under *Chapman*. In *People v. Mil*, *supra*, 53 Cal.4th 400, the Court held that the erroneous omission of two elements of an offense from the jury instructions was subject to *Chapman* review. (*Id.* at p. 417.) Drawing from *Neder* and *Pulido*, the Court reasoned that “harmless-error analysis applies to instructional errors so long as the error at issue does not categorically vitiate *all* the jury’s findings.” (*Id.* at p. 412, quoting *Pulido*, *supra*, 555 U.S. at p. 61, internal quotation marks omitted.) And extending that decision a few years later, the Court held in *People v. Merritt* (2017) 2 Cal.5th 819, that instructional error in omitting all the elements of the charged offense of robbery in that case was subject to harmless review under *Chapman*. (*Id.* at p. 830.) There, identity was the only contested issue, the jury was correctly instructed as to identity, counsel accurately argued the elements of robbery to the jury, the jury found on other proper instructions that the defendant possessed the requisite mental state for robbery, and the jury found true a firearm-use allegation. (*Ibid.*) In light of the arguments of counsel and the jury’s findings, and because the evidence of robbery “was overwhelming and uncontroverted,” the Court held that the instructional error was harmless under *Chapman*. (*Id.* at pp. 831-832.)

**C. Application of *Green* as the Exclusive Test in Cases of Alternative-Legal-Theory Error Is Incompatible with Modern Harmless-Error Precedent**

The foregoing authority compels application of *Chapman*, not *Green*, as the governing harmless review standard in cases of alternative-legal-theory error. The *Green* standard, if used as the exclusive test, is one that requires near-automatic reversal—it prohibits affirmance except in cases where it

can be ascertained that the jury necessarily relied on the valid theory.<sup>2</sup> That standard cannot be reconciled with the reasoning or results of decisions since *Green* and *Guiton*.

Although the *Pulido* Court did not directly address what harmless standard governs alternative-legal-theory error on direct review as a matter of federal law, its decision strongly indicates that the test would be no more stringent than the ordinary *Chapman* inquiry. (*Pulido, supra*, 555 U.S. at p. 61 [nothing in Court’s prior cases suggests a standard other than *Chapman* would apply to alternative-legal-theory error]; see also *Skilling, supra*, 561 U.S. at p. 414 & fn. 46 [principles discussed in *Pulido* apply “equally” to cases on direct review].) That is especially true in light of the Court’s criticism of the rule that the lower court had used in that case, requiring “certainty” that the jury actually relied on the valid theory. (*Pulido, supra*, 555 U.S. at pp. 59-60, 62; see also *Neder, supra*, 527 U.S. at p. 17 [rejecting similar proposed rule].) And *Chapman* is the usual standard applicable to federal constitutional error on direct review. (*Brecht, supra*, 507 U.S. at p. 630.) Following *Neder* and *Pulido*, federal appellate courts may affirm despite alternative-legal-theory error if, after a thorough examination of the record, it appears beyond a reasonable doubt that the

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<sup>2</sup> See *Pulido, supra*, 555 U.S. at p. 62 [rule requiring certainty that jury relied on valid theory would appear to entail “a finding that no violation had occurred at all, rather than that any error was harmless”]; *Neder, supra*, 527 U.S. at p. 17 [rule allowing affirmance only upon determination that jury actually rested its verdict on evidence the instructions properly allowed it to consider “is simply another form of the argument that a failure to instruct on any element of the crime is not subject to harmless-error analysis”]; *Breverman, supra*, 19 Cal.4th at p. 175 [overruling “the stringent *Sedeno* test of near-automatic reversal”]; *Flood, supra*, 18 Cal.4th at pp. 483-484 [*Sedeno* represents narrow exception to general rule of automatic reversal]; *People v. Pulido* (1997) 15 Cal.4th 713, 716 [equating *Sedeno* and *Green* rules]; *Guiton, supra*, 4 Cal.4th at p. 1130 [same].