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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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**JAN SOKOL'S ETHICS OF HERITAGE:
ASSESSING THE PRACTICALITY AND UNIVERSALITY
OF A CZECH PHILOSOPHY**

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Declaration

I declare that I have created the submitted dissertation by myself. All sources and literature used have been duly cited. The work was not used to obtain another or the same title. This declaration and consent will be signed a by handwritten signature.

Abstract

Jan Sokol published his book, *Ethics, Life and Institutions: An Attempt at Practical Philosophy*, with the goal of creating a universal ethic to be considered by all in their actions. The book culminates with his exploration of the Ethics of Heritage, asserting that culture and institutions must be cared for as an inheritance. This thesis aims to prove that Jan Sokol's Ethics of Heritage is a viable philosophy that can withstand philosophical criticism and be upheld as a universal basis of ethics. Additionally, this thesis will prove that Jan Sokol has achieved his goal as stated in the book, and that his ethics can leave a lasting legacy. This will be achieved by examining Jan Sokol's Ethics of Heritage and evaluating its philosophical roots, challenging its ability to withstand criticism, and exploring its modern practicality and possible impact on the future. These goals will be guided by examining the bases of the Ethics of Heritage (including building an understanding of Sokol's life and inspiration), exploring select ideas that stand in opposition to Sokol's ethics and utilizing the philosophy found in *Ethics, Life, and Institutions* to provide solutions, and exploring the possibilities of future uses for the Ethics of Heritage and the impact Sokol's ideas have already had to prove their universality. There is a lack of literature in the English language examining this novel attempt at practical philosophy and pushing it to its logical extremes, which is a gap that this dissertation hopes to fill.

Keywords:

ethics of heritage, dissident philosophy, practical philosophy, cultural inheritance, institutions

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1: Introduction

Questions of moral decay have been plaguing humanity for centuries. As Jan Sokol states on the back cover of *Life, Ethics, and Institutions: An Attempt at Practical Philosophy*, “General complaints about moral decay, however frequent and perhaps even justified they might be, are of little use.”¹ After all, at what point does all of this complaining become immoral in itself? It appears that addressing problems is significantly easier to achieve than offering valid solutions. Society has a need to find a way to navigate the complexities of freedom, institutions, and culture; to quell the conflicts and confusions caused by difference, oppression, and goals that stand in opposition to each other. This calls for a practical philosophy that can be followed by all people: something that can help people decide “what is good and bad – what *should* and *should not* be.”² Some may claim that such a broad and overarching solution may seem out of reach, considering the vast array of complications we are faced with on a daily basis. It has, however, become a key focus of philosophy for many centuries.

Though this task may seem impossible, Jan Sokol brings a compelling idea to the table. In his book, *Life, Ethics, and Institutions*, Sokol offers an attempt at creating a practical philosophy that hopes to “point out what needs to be considered by everybody in his or her actions, and why.”³ This ambitious solution takes into consideration the life sciences and bridges the divide between humanity and the life that thrives around us, pointing out our similarities without forgetting to distinguish ourselves from our animal cousins. It delves into the responsibility that comes with the gift of life and the importance of the culture and institutions that we inherit. It also explores human behaviour, from our primitive roots to our modern beliefs, to build upon a new foundation for how we should see the world and act within it. All of these aspects culminate to form the most important aspect of the book that this thesis will focus on: The Ethics of Heritage.

When one thinks of heritage, it is common to imagine a family tree, a homeland, or perhaps an ethnic group. The thought of inheritance brings up images of the physical passing on of goods and assets from a deceased relative to their respective heir. While these ideas are related to inheritance as a whole, they are not what makes Sokol’s Ethics of

1 Jan Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions: An Attempt at Practical Philosophy* (Charles University in Prague, Karolinum Press, 2016).

2 Ibid., 7.

3 Ibid., 9.

Heritage so intriguing and relevant to Western society. Though procreation is a fantastic way to continue our genes and leaving an inheritance assist the continuation of generational wealth, Sokol's ideas go far beyond a surface-level interpretation of the word. The society we orient ourselves within has been meticulously curated, adjusted, and improved by centuries of trial and error, which the current generation will impact and leave for those in the future. Many of the institutions we come into contact with in our daily lives were somehow passed on to us, upheld and improved upon, sometimes for centuries or millennia. This inheritance is far beyond what any two parents could give a child alone, yet is something no child can live without. The very language that we speak was passed as an heirloom far before we were conceived, slowly evolving and adapting to the passage of time. As we age, the meaning of this language, the proper use, tones, and rhythms of speech are impressed upon us by schools, media, and our peers. We speak this language, learn its uses, and create new words and phrases, only to continue the process once we have kids of our own.

Culture itself follows a very similar path of evolution. Even though each generation builds its own nuance and understanding of how to act around others, the looming institution of common culture remains upheld and enforced. Core aspects hold their ground as essential criticism and iterations pile upon each other. In the event that a society collapses, or a culture undergoes mass changes, the intergenerational passing on of knowledge and customs presses on with new vigour. Even organizations, such as hospitals, schools, and governments, are offered as a gift to us with the purpose of governing, offering help, or enhancing culture. Though we often pay dearly in taxes for governmental infrastructure, the pre-existing knowledge and ideas are given to us to use freely. To be upheld, the people who benefit from these institutions must acknowledge their responsibility. Schools teach students valuable information to improve their lives, and a portion of those students grow to hold the same roles as the teachers they once studied under. Governments provide public services like roads, police, and fire departments, but require active participation to continue serving citizens and saving lives. Though it may seem trivial, these services are taken for-granted. It is only when disaster strikes that many people realize the dependence they have formed to institutions.

Our inheritance has become so grand, so encompassing, that no one individual can form an understanding of its entirety to pass down to the next generation. The amount of organizations, institutions, and cultural details calls for each individual to have a certain amount of responsibility to others. Many humans depend on society as much as society

depends on the people who uphold it. Individuals also have a responsibility to themselves, ensuring that the institutions they are upholding are worth being passed on. How do we uphold these institutions? What do we do if they are unjust or evil? How can we determine which institutions to uphold and which to destroy? Society naturally evolves faster than those who live in it, but at what point must the systems be restored to what they once were or destroyed entirely for something new?

Jan Sokol offers insight into how to deal with these issues, how to make proper use of this inheritance and ensure its viability for future generations, and why. It covers issues of corruption, exclusion, and how to thrive under strict regimes. It serves reminders of our responsibility both to our children and our parents, and addresses the modern lack of concern and gratitude for such an important aspect of our lives. It teaches us how to act morally as citizens, employees, and members of a family in a way that reduces conflict, strengthens bonds, and builds up a healthier society. This thesis aims to prove that Jan Sokol's Ethics of Heritage is a viable philosophy that can distinguish itself from differing philosophies and be actively applied to issues facing the modern world. This will prove that Jan Sokol has achieved the goal that he set for himself at the beginning of the book.

The following work will be split into four chapters. The first will explore the aspects of Sokol's life that may have influenced his ideas, providing personal context for many of the ideas presented. Since Jan Sokol's Ethics of Heritage is a practical philosophy, this chapter will aim to show where Sokol practically applied his ideas in his own works. The following chapter will explore aspects of the life sciences that the author used as a basis and inspiration, diving deep into the broader contexts of the ideas Sokol himself inherited and attempted to pass on. It will consider the importance of gratitude for life and the responsibility that follows, as well as contextualizing Sokol's view of heritage, defining important aspects of the philosophy itself. This basis of understanding will create the grounds for comparison with different philosophies and societal issues, which will explore the modern rhetoric of moral relativism and how Sokol's ideas compare, an eroding trust in institutions, and the modern worries of lobbying and corruption within democracies. This chapter will aim to highlight what makes Sokol's philosophy different from ideas that are popular, while defending the importance of institutions and organizations with evidence of how Sokol's ideas can improve them. The final section will push the Ethics of Heritage into its logical extremes by showing an application of it in the very modern technology we depend on, by providing help in the environmental worry that plagues the youth, and by assessing whether Sokol has achieved his goal.

This topic carries much importance. Not only is there an abysmally small amount of content related to the author in English, but the ideas brought to life should be explored more in the Western world. There is need for a groundwork to live by and a basis for meaning and understanding in a world where post-modern ideas have left society in want of deeper meaning and understanding of its surroundings. Additionally, institutions and organizations have become essential to modern life, but must be evaluated and more deeply understood. Many people forget this important fact of life and require the reminder that these ideas offer. With the continuing rise of capitalism and democracy, the lack of literature outlining how to ethically and morally thrive in this world is one that must be addressed, and Jan Sokol's philosophy could provide a solution that must at least be considered. If his work is based upon firm foundation, is distinct from but can withstand opposing views, and can be implemented in important aspects of modern life, Sokol may have provided a solution that eases the idea of living among such monolithic influences within society.

2: Personal and Human Experiences as a Philosophical Basis

In order to understand someone's philosophy, it is important to build a deeper understanding of their experiences and influences. Despite being banned from entering university in the Communist era, Jan Sokol still had a burning passion to learn. Whether it was secretly studying under his father-in-law Jan Patočka or through direct experience in the trades, Sokol never let the crushing weight of Communism crush his spirit. With his deep understanding of the system of Communism as a dissident, it is very clear that Sokol values freedom and understands how absurdly monolithic institutions can vastly affect the way one lives. The fact that he risked his freedom to sign Charter 77, a vastly important document for the freedom of the Czechs, proves that Sokol was willing to uphold his own ethics and live the values he proclaimed to those around him. His later experience in Post-Communist Czech Republic also displayed his vast understanding of massive cultural change, adaptability, and upheaval. He not only knows the limitations of authoritarianism, but he deeply understands the possible flaws and pitfalls of too much freedom. This experiential basis is one that many young philosophers could not experience first hand, especially those in the West, and proves that his ideas have been battle tested over years of unique human experience.

This chapter will explain these experiences in a way that further contextualizes Sokol's ideas based on the practical application of them in his own life. Since the Ethics of Heritage is a *practical* philosophy and not a *theoretical* one, this chapter is important because it provides essential examples of the Ethics of Heritage being used by the one who has the deepest understanding of its values. Sokol's history legitimizes his philosophy by proving that his ideas are based upon truth and real-life experiences. It also serves as an inspiration for those who feel overwhelmed among the monolithic institutions that surround them, proving that this world can be navigated positively no matter how difficult it may seem.

2.1: Life as a Dissident

Carrying on his inheritance of millennia worth of tradition, Sokol's first act of dissidence was being raised Catholic in a system that frowned upon it. This barred him entry to educational institutions after finishing elementary school, and left him to find work

first as a goldsmith, and later as a precision mechanic.⁴ Though many may see this as a major threat to their future, Sokol was able to be content in this position, utilizing his freedom of choice within his limited options to create the best of his situation. In an interview with Radio Prague International, Sokol stated that “[his] time as a craftsman was in fact rather a good opportunity to learn something.”⁵ He was taught, among other things, the value of playing a role within a system. It was not until the 1960’s when Sokol’s second act of dissidence was carried out. With an interest in philosophy, Jan Sokol turned to his father-in-law, Jan Patočka, to be his personal mentor. Jan Patočka was “forbidden to teach,” leaving Sokol to take on “the role of a surrogate student.”⁶ Such an arrangement was advantageous for both men, allowing Patočka to defy the government, and providing Sokol with an opportunity to learn from “one of the greatest of Czech philosophers.”⁷ Though Sokol “never did the sort of philosophy he was doing,” Patočka’s passion and enthusiasm for philosophy was “a big lesson for [Sokol].”⁸ By introducing Sokol to philosophy and inspiring him to take it seriously, Patočka would end up having a major impact on the rest of Sokol’s life.

One of the fruits of Patočka’s influence was encouraging Sokol to be one of the earliest signers of Charter 77, which some see as “the first public action of a newly-emergent Czechoslovak dissident movement.”⁹ Charter 77 called for “freedom of public expression” and asserted that “the extent to which basic human rights in our country exist, regrettably, on paper alone.”¹⁰ The charter was published both locally and abroad, much to the dissatisfaction of the Communists. As a result, those who signed the article were held under much scrutiny, and many were arrested. Nonetheless, the charter aided the struggle of dissidents to be understood on a broader scale by the international community, placing increased pressure on the Czechoslovak government to make the people feel more free and to quell the rising dissatisfaction.

4 Ian Willoughby, Jan Sokol – Part 1: It would be an exaggeration to say the StB killed Jan Patočka | Radio Prague International, January 20, 2020, <https://english.radio.cz/jan-sokol-part-1-it-would-be-exaggeration-say-stb-killed-jan-patocka-8110207>.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 “Declaration of Charter 77 | World History Commons,” accessed April 26, 2024, <https://worldhistorycommons.org/declaration-charter-77>.

10 Ibid.

The article came at a very important time, when the Communist government was long past the Stalinist era and slowly allowing more and more freedom of expression in art and radio. This alleviated some of the stress placed upon dissidents, but did not allow them to sign this charter without considerable risk. As Jan Sokol stated in a lecture about the importance of human rights, “dissident movements are only possible in very specific social circumstances: namely under serious, but not excessively brutal political pressure.”¹¹ The Chartists, despite their combined goals and values, were never able to organize together or form meetings. Nonetheless, their persistence in sharing their views greatly assisted in the Velvet Revolution. Sokol himself, regularly taking part in demonstrations on Wenceslas Square, underestimated the Velvet Revolution and was “very skeptical about the future”, worrying that Communism “seemed that it was something which could not be destroyed.”¹² Due to this worry and doubt, ideas were being spread via less conventional or mainstream ways. Sokol admired “overly conspiratorial methods”, somehow aiming to fight a monolithic system “with typewriters and carbon paper as their only weapons.”¹³ Luckily, Sokol was never directly imprisoned by the Communist secret police (StB), nor did he lose his job. According to Sokol, by that time he was working in computer development, where the Communist government “needed” him because he was “rather successful.”¹⁴ He was, however, regularly subjected to interrogation. This method of oppression has a massive chilling effect on the expression of thought, leaving people “condemned to the constant risk of unemployment or other penalties if they voice their own opinions.”¹⁵

Experiencing these harsh conditions while actively speaking out against them was paramount for shaping Jan Sokol’s Ethics of Heritage by informing his view on interacting with institutions, as well as his outlook on the importance of freedom. In his lecture, “Dictatorship to Democracy: The Role of Human Rights Protectors,” Sokol utilizes his experiences to challenge the Western values of freedom for not echoing those of the people who were suffering from a lack of it. In reference to the flawed ways in which Western countries interpret the freedoms called for by people suffering from oppressive regimes, Sokol states, “if we do wish to see a multicultural acceptance of the concept of human

11 Jan Sokol, “Dictatorship to Democracy: The Role of Human Rights Defenders,” April 28, 2016, https://mzv.gov.cz/dublin/en/bilateral_relations/archive/dublin_lecture_by_professor_jan_sokol_on.html.

12 Willoughby, Jan Sokol - Part 1: Jan Patočka.

13 Sokol, “Dictatorship to Democracy,” 4–5.

14 Willoughby, Jan Sokol - Part 1: Jan Patočka.

15 “Declaration of Charter 77 | World History Commons.”

rights, we should pay very careful attention to the unspoken assumptions on which they rest, and which strike many in the West as self-evident.”¹⁶ This experience greatly assisted in creating an ethic that could be more widely universalized, showcasing a deep understanding of two polarized extremes. The lessons learned from this part of Sokol’s life are apparent in *Life, Ethics, and Institutions*. Sokol recognizes that “the ever-increasing real power of organizations in modern mass societies is constantly in danger of being abused, and the effects can be devastating”¹⁷ and the fact that whistleblowers¹⁸ must withstand being called “grass and “snitch” in order to “save the whole society from serious damage”¹⁹. Communism was the powerful institution Sokol was subjected to, and he himself was the snitch. Although his *Ethics of Heritage* advocates for the preservation of what people inherit, Sokol equally highlights the importance of “philosophizing with a hammer,” stating that institutions “often deserve criticism.”²⁰ Besides, the freedom that comes naturally with his inheritance of life was deeply infringed upon. This called for destroying institutions that disregard human rights in order to create a healthier inheritance for those to come. Closely reflecting his own experience as a child, Sokol calls for this by warning people that “if they do not want to spend their lives from what they do and reduced to cleaning windows or stoking boilers, they should pay closer attention to public institutions [by] offering criticism.”²¹ Ultimately, Sokol’s philosophy both aided in and was inspired by the liberation of an entire nation from an institution that seemed too strong to fail.

2.2: Life After Communism

Soon after the fall of Communism, Sokol was pushed into taking the role of a spokesperson of the Civic Forum by his colleagues. They encouraged him to take an active role in politics in order to shape the Civic Forum, since there were “too many former communists.”²² His two years in parliament “brought [him] to a completely different conception of philosophy,” asserting that “[his] philosophy from then on was always

16 Sokol, “Dictatorship to Democracy.”

17 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 222.

18 in reference to individuals who release private information to the public in order to inform them about the injustices carried out by institutions

19 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 223.

20 *Ibid.*, 234.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Willoughby, Jan Sokol - Part 1: Jan Patočka.

oriented in this direction”²³ This experience has clear reflections in *Ethics, Life, and Institutions*, where his political prowess and passion culminates in his Ethics of Heritage, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. There was more to his political career, as Sokol later served as the education minister after achieving an MA in Anthropology and a Ph.D in Philosophy. Due to his newfound freedom under the new government, Sokol was finally able to become of professor in the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University. There was a large change in the staff as society was undergoing critical adjustments, causing many of Sokol’s friends, who were also students of Jan Patočka, to work at the faculty. Inspired by the “liberal American education scheme,” Sokol and his friends founded the Faculty of Humanities in order to allow students to achieve a well-rounded education in multiple different fields.²⁴ The faculty became fully autonomous in 2000, where Sokol acted as the first Dean.²⁵ As an homage to his legacy, one of the auditoriums was named in his honour.

Sokol’s political career reached its apex when he ran for the role of Czech President to a more politically experienced opponent, Vaclav Klaus, in the Social Democrat party. This vital time in Sokol’s life cemented him as someone who actively lived according to the ethics he proclaimed and aimed to build a society that would bring a more just inheritance for those who follow. Once again, Sokol was urged to take on a political role by his friends and colleagues, who saw him as the right man to follow the strong lead into freedom that Vaclav Havel helped to pioneer. Though Havel took up his position “in an almost revolutionary situation,” Sokol aimed to follow his lead of “firming [the new institutions,” calling to “fight against corruption” and to “[make] state institutions more transparent.” Reflecting his future goals of creating a universal ethic that could work for all people, Sokol was able to earn a reputation of being able to “stand above politics” and act as a “skilful mediator” and a “moral figure.”²⁶ Sokol was willing to set aside the aspects of his personal beliefs that could cause contention in the primarily secular nation, stating that “it was an error for [him] to support the introduction of compulsory catechism in schools

23 Ibid.

24 Ian Willoughby, Jan Sokol – Part 2: Zeman grasped the chance to mobilise people who were not winners of the political changes, January 27, 2020, <https://english.radio.cz/jan-sokol-part-2-zeman-grasped-chance-mobilise-people-who-were-not-winners-8109640>.

25 “Faculty of Humanities - Charles University - Czech Universities,” accessed June 11, 2024, <https://www.czechuniversities.com/catalogue-of-universities/charles-university/faculty-of-humanities>.

26 Vuletic, “Jan Sokol: The Man Who Could Be President,” Radio Prague International, February 26, 2003, <https://english.radio.cz/jan-sokol-man-who-could-be-president-8071267>.

and the banning of abortion.”²⁷ Forcing his morality upon others was not a goal of Sokol’s campaign, which reflects a substantial value shown in *Ethics, Life, and Institutions*: the importance of the freedom of others. Taking on the role of a mediator was seen as essential to Sokol, with the goal of bringing political parties together in a coalition government to ensure “efficient collaboration.”²⁸ In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary for Sokol to play a role within an institution that was separate from his private life without completely diminishing his individuality.

Many of these experiences are apparent in Sokol’s *Ethics of Heritage*. His first political role shaped the way Sokol viewed philosophy, causing his ethics in *Ethics, Life, and Institutions* to reflect what he learned. A significant portion of the *Ethics of Heritage* deals directly with governmental institutions, highlighting the importance of playing a role separate from one’s private life, eliminating corruption within these systems, and the inheritance of these institutions into the care of future generations. Sokol’s involvement with Charles University’s Faculty of Humanities and the broad overarching style of education it offers reflects the wide net Sokol casts in his ethics. The *Ethics of Heritage* was not meant to act as an ultra-specific guide of how to deal with every situation, but instead covers many topics with an actionable basis and leaves plenty of space for individuals to “make their own moral evaluations and judgments”²⁹ and pursue individual aspects of his ideas in further depth if they so choose. Even the sources used in order to build credibility for his ideas extensively dive into the same fields as the Liberal Arts and Humanities program: Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, and to a lesser extent, Economics.³⁰

The statements Sokol made in his presidential campaign, however, have a significantly closer bond with his *Ethics of Heritage*. Many of the ideas and goals of Sokol in this time are directly reflected in his ethics, and are quite familiar to those who have read

27 Ibid. (originally quoted in an article from the *Mlada fronta Dnes* newspaper)

28 Rob Cameron, Jan Sokol - unafraid of walking in shadow of Vaclav Havel, February 27, 2003, <https://english.radio.cz/jan-sokol-unafraid-walking-shadow-vaclav-havel-8071301>.

29 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 9.

30 Many anthropological sources are used to cement ancient traditions of inheritance as a basis for Sokol’s *Ethics of Heritage*. Numerous sociological sources, such as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah Arendt and *The Imperative of Responsibility* by Hans Jonas are used to back many of his arguments. The use of philosophy in his ethics goes without saying, and sources from economics were used in Sokol’s evaluations of democratic and capitalistic states.

his book. Sokol's goal of eliminating corruption by adding transparency to state institutions is expressed when he states "the best remedy to counter corruption is therefore transparency, and perhaps even the need to make relevant information available to the public."³¹ His observation of Vaclav Havel's role of "destroying the old and building new institutions" and the massive upheaval of Czech government balances his views of freedom versus authority, the effect a collapsing society has on its inhabitants, and the steps required to take in such an occurrence. This is showcased when Sokol talks about a post-communist Czechia and the effects of "the urgent need to change the ownership structure of the whole economy."³² Even the goal of acting as a mediator is reflected when Sokol states, "when major decisions are being made, we simply have to reckon with direct and indirect pressure from various pressure groups, lobbies, and so on."³³ Jan Sokol's aim was to be "acting in a role": someone who can "act in accordance with their designated task," while still acting as a "discerning human being and not automata"³⁴ when he set aside his opposition to abortion without fully abandoning his morality. He also understood the inheritance offered to him by Vaclav Havel: a free country with enough utility to allow its citizens a better life. With his personal life and experiences out of the way, we can now explore the aspects of the book *Ethics, Life, and Institutions* itself that build up to Sokol's Ethics of Heritage.

31 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 224.

32 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*.

33 Ibid., 219.

34 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*.

3: Foundations of the Ethics of Heritage

Jan Sokol builds up a firm basis for his Ethics of Heritage by closely linking human life to the life of nature around us. Many of Sokol's ethics have strong natural and historical foundations, which lends a great deal of authority and credibility to his assertions. The Ethics of Heritage works because the need to pass on our 'genes,' whether biological or cultural, comes naturally in the evolution of mankind. These factors culminate in a beautiful combination of natural habits and human morality, reminding humanity that life as a whole, including nature, mankind, and the institutions that we depend on, must be deeply recognized by all members of society. The universal experience of life establishes a gratitude that recognizes this life as a gift. Since this gift cannot necessarily be repaid to those who gave it, a universal responsibility to pay it forward is introduced. This responsibility is an essential aspect of the Ethics of Heritage, and demands that members of society uphold its benefits and pass it down to those who follow. There is also both a civic and moral responsibility, which must be governed both by the society itself and those who inhabit it.

Life as a whole and the gratitude and responsibility that come with it culminates in the importance of inheritance. This inheritance is built up of many things, including biology, physical assets, society and culture, and the institutions and organizations that come with it. Modern life is not possible without it, especially the inheritance of society and culture and the aspects that create it. Because society was given to us upon birth, we must pass it on to those who come after and ensure that it is upheld where it is beneficial and criticized if it is not. This heritage is universal, but many seem to forget about its importance and fall into a harmful apathy of what it means for human life. All people, because they are given this essential gift, must pass it on.

3.1: Implementation of Life

Jan Sokol's book stands out from many other philosophical works with his implementation of the life sciences, which he claims have "discovered and re-established the term 'human nature,' with a meaning which extends far beyond the boundaries of the empirical sciences."³⁵ With Darwin's discovery of the process of evolution, it can be seen that man, being classified as an animal, can look upon other animals to arrive upon an understanding of our own natural behaviour. Even Comenius agrees, stating "The source of

³⁵ Ibid., 25.

God's warning [is] the example of other creatures, in whom we learn how they maintain themselves in their being."³⁶ After all, we are organisms that require food and company, reproduce, and self-regulate. Over time, our species changes and evolves, albeit at a faster pace in terms of culture and society. Nonetheless, analyzing the behaviour of animals and prehistoric humans is of much use to Sokol. These behaviours often reflect, and even validate, many of the structures that society has built itself upon, including the evolution and passing down of culture and institutions.

Sokol defines the word "life" by splitting the concept into two different meanings: "'my life' and 'all life, life as such.'"³⁷ The first of which relates to something "internal and private," where the other represents "everything that lives, and not only at the present moment, but also diachronically, stretching back into the past, from where all life originates, and into the future."³⁸ Both of these aspects carry importance throughout the text. Some aspects of the ideas presented by Sokol have a direct impact upon and implication towards individuals on a primarily personal level. For example, the role of the heir and steward is a very actionable concept for the reader: one has inherited life as a gift, and thus must thrive toward maintaining that life. Sokol does, however, highlight important aspects of life as a whole: both in his care for the environment and the fact that his ethic was designed to be implemented on a societal level. The implementation of these ideas on a personal level, if carried out by enough people, cascades rapidly into the realm of "life as a whole." Sokol asserts that "respect for each currently living person will need to be expanded to take in those who come after us. 'My life' also belongs to life as a whole and, in this regard, does not belong to me alone."³⁹ This further cements the implementation of life as essential in the Ethics of Heritage, which has a great deal to do with the importance of living one's life with considerations of future generations in mind. In his evaluation of the life sciences, Sokol points out certain commonalities within this "life as a whole" that includes animals as well: this can be seen in the various ways that human behaviour mirrors that of animals, such as Sokol's mention of "the powerful sex drive of the animals, from which man is not immune."⁴⁰ However, Sokol admits that "one of the oldest motifs on

36 Ibid., 27. (In reference to his previous statement, highlighting "the art of doing politics and keeping peace in a big society")

37 Ibid., 25.

38 Ibid., 25–26.

39 Ibid., 41.

40 Ibid., 38.

which human culture is based” is “the attempt to differentiate ourselves from our animal cousins”⁴¹ and acknowledges “the shock caused by Darwin’s *Origin of Man*” in relating humans to animals. This is quelled by the idea that “man comes from nature and carries within himself significant traces of his primate origins, but also stands in opposition to it.”⁴² Thus Sokol mediates the difference between man and animal, neither fully linking or separating man from animal. Though there are many similarities between the two, mankind, in its advancement, has a far higher responsibility to develop morality and to live in a distinctly different way from our animal cousins without forgetting our close relationship.

One of the important aspects of Sokol’s view on life is his view of reproduction. According to the Bible, humans are called to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.”⁴³ A similar strategy is also seen in animals, who aim to preserve their genes by finding a mate. Since life is limited, humans have the urge to go on living ad infinitum. The only way to achieve this is by passing on one’s genes in order to continue a bloodline. Reproduction, if not multiplication, creates one of most meaningful legacies one can tangibly achieve after death, thus securing care and love for the offspring and providing a mutual return for the parents when necessary. This offspring is a fresh start, causing the species to “appear to be collectively ageless.”⁴⁴ Humans are able to expand to fill the environment they inhabit in competition with others, urged by the need to protect their own and continue life by any means possible. Sokol calls this the “selfish” gene.⁴⁵ Such a simplified explanation, however, perhaps relates us too closely with the animals. It must be acknowledged that this view “exaggerates the importance of genetic determination and ignores social human culture.”⁴⁶ Humans are much more than just a “medium for transmitting something which reproduces itself and continues independently of us and above our heads”⁴⁷ We are also dependent, which is another important aspect of life. There is a marked dependence not only on our environment and habitat, but also on social human culture. Society protects and upholds its inhabitants, and human connection is essential to

41 Ibid., 84.

42 Ibid., 86.

43 *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*, Catholic Edition (Oxford University Press, 2004). Genesis 1:28

44 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 32.

45 Ibid., 33.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

achieve a happy life. Even the act of reproduction has become something that symbolizes something beautiful, as “sexual intimacy can maintain partnerships and need not serve only the creation of new life.”⁴⁸ Evolution involves the slow mutation during reproduction, and human interaction has followed the exact same path by creating societies. This mutation, though seemingly natural, is our deviation from nature that makes us unique.

It can clearly be noted that institutions share many similarities to these living organisms. They can grow and expand, depend on their surroundings and environment, and go through their own reproductive process. This is where the idea of inheritance expands beyond the gifts that are given to a son or daughter upon their parents’ demise. As the Earth rotates around the sun and the organisms upon it go through their life cycles, institutions find ways to keep on going. Inheritance is the solution to that. Similar to how two parents share their genes that are continued in their offspring, institutions are maintained by established members of society teaching them and normalizing the youth. They also evolve through time (albeit at a much quicker pace) as new generations make changes in order to suit them the best. Without this cycle, similar to that of humans and animals, these institutions would cease to exist. “The very continuance of life depends directly on its being passed on.”⁴⁹ Similarly, an institution collapses when nobody follows its traditions or upholds its infrastructure. Thus, heritage is essential for human survival. Sokol states, “We do not merely live *in* society, but *thanks to* society.”⁵⁰ These ideas presented by Sokol help to assert the Ethics of Heritage as easy to be universalized, as many aspects of it are already baked into our DNA. Such an important aspect of our lives, however, must depend on some sort of ethical basis or universal responsibility to ensure that these institutions continue to benefit life as a whole.

Add somewhere: “Sokol’s conception of ethical commitments stems from his philosophy of life: life itself is the main value and central motif linking the various areas of his thought.”⁵¹

48 Ibid., 38.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 34.

51 Milan Hanyš, “Náboženství, Etika a Život: Nástin Filosofie Jana Sokola,” *Lidé Města* 23, no. 1 (2021): 39. Quotes from this article have been translated by the DeepL translation tool.

3.2: Gratitude and Responsibility

Through the beauty of life we encounter what Milan Hanyš, in an article outlining the philosophy of Jan Sokol, posits is “the central theme of [Sokol’s] ethics, which is gratitude for the gift of existence.”⁵² This gratitude “is based on an evolutionary understanding of the world and flows into an ethics of responsibility for life and its transmission, which in humans also includes the transmission of institutions and cultural artifacts.”⁵³ Life is a fantastic and irreplaceable gift; it is a beautiful experience given to all humans that must be respected. Jan Sokol viewed gifts as “a unilateral act, which nevertheless creates a certain moral obligation in the recipient.”⁵⁴ Thus, an important responsibility is placed upon mankind, and is one that follows man throughout his entire life. Gratitude for life recontextualizes this gift as something that must not only be cherished, but something that must also be ‘repaid’. Though this gratitude for life was influenced by Sokol’s religion, it still applies to all people equally. To Sokol, it did not matter to whom or what you attributed this gratitude to; the important aspect was that this gratefulness would be expressed in some way, either to an institution, a god, or even one’s parents.

The “human responsibility” that comes with ‘repaying’ this gift may, at first glance, “seem to lack counterparts.” It is still, according to Sokol, perhaps “the most fundamental and most important responsibilities of all.”⁵⁵ Such an important aspect of our lives may seem to be an impossible task, yet holds a high place of importance for the Ethics of Heritage. With such a monumental gift, the wealth of life inherited from our parents that is the cause of a person’s very existence, how can we be expected to repay it? Jan Sokol posits that “if the recipient wishes to comply with the giver’s wishes, he cannot return the favour to the giver but must turn his attention to the inheritance itself – how he manages it and looks after it.”⁵⁶ This creates an obligation which “lies in that the heir does not regard this inherited ‘wealth’ as merely for his own consumption but rather as something he himself should look after and one day bequeath to someone else.”⁵⁷ Since it cannot be repaid, the only option is to give it to someone else. Humanity is given the obligation to

52 Ibid., 35.

53 Ibid., 35.

54 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 167.

55 Ibid., 78.

56 Ibid., 168.

57 Ibid., 180.

not only pass on what man is given, but to ensure that it remains a positive and rewarding gift to those who receive it; thus, our responsibility is “not necessarily focused on the present and singular actions, but relates to both the past and future dimensions.”⁵⁸ This directly matches with the responsibility of the parent from the very beginning. Conceiving a child creates “an unconditional obligation [...] to take care of the human being who is actually not quite there yet, or to be precise, is just beginning.”⁵⁹ Similar to our gratitude for life, our responsibility for it must not only be related to those who gave it to us. This responsibility is to the society we inherit, the Earth we live in, and the people who will inhabit it after us.

Jan Sokol also mentions civil and moral responsibility, which is imparted upon all who participate in society. According to Sokol, civil responsibility involves “demanding that we reconcile ourselves to our share of the consequences, that we answer the questions of other people, and, finally, the possibility that we will have to answer for them to a court – in the knowledge that we may have to compensate for the damage caused or accept punishment.”⁶⁰ This induces judgment from governmental organizations, requiring rules imposed upon people that they must follow for the benefit of society. These rules ensure that members of society can trust each other and live in safety. This sense of credibility and security is not completely decided by the law, however. Some moral responsibilities cannot be enforced, and must be acted upon by the morality of the individual, informed partially by custom. According to Sokol, “today we place more emphasis on each person who has decided and acted (or not acted) judging his or her guilt.”⁶¹ This establishes the need for a moral framework that acts as a establish a universal basis for humanity to act. Fortunately, “man is able to think, learn from experience, predict consequences, and even evaluate himself; and it is the task of morality to help him in this.”⁶² Judeo-Christian values were able to promote a “universally human foundation of morality by binding it to religious faith” out of “gratitude for the Lord,”⁶³ but such an impetus is not enough to stand in a largely religiously apathetic society. Similarly, merely trusting one’s personal judgment of morality can cause a disconnect of differing opinions that others may not see as morality at

58 Hanyš, “Náboženství, Etika a Život,” 41.

59 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 182–83.

60 *Ibid.*, 76.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*, 104.

63 *Ibid.*, 111.

all. Thus, it is “desirable to develop the skills of judgment and thought through education, and to reinforce them through repetition.”⁶⁴ This creates a healthy balance between one’s own judgment and their “unlimited responsibility for the other,”⁶⁵ linking personal morality with consideration for others in society.

3.3: Heritage and Inheritance

Modern discussion of inheritance is often relegated to physical assets passed on to descendants upon death. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, an inheritance is defined as either “money or objects that someone gives you when they die” or “a physical or mental characteristic inherited from your parents, or the process by which this happens.”⁶⁶ Jan Sokol acknowledges this perception of heritage, linking it to the cultural basis of ancient civilizations. For self-sufficient farmsteads to survive, they depended on a “strict separation of family property” which was passed down from father to son which created “the strict obligation to ensure the continuation of the family line.”⁶⁷ The tradition of familial inheritance has continued, evolving into a system where one’s Last Will and Testament decides which assets are distributed to whom. Such an inheritance only encompasses a miniscule aspect of the one in which Sokol has based his philosophy, especially because modern livelihood does not depend on it. Instead, “we draw on an ever-richer ‘inheritance’; not only in the biological sense but also culturally and socially.”⁶⁸ Though we depend upon the “material, cultural, or social” aspects of life passed on to us from our ancestors, “we have ceased to view these as our inheritance.”⁶⁹ To understand the Ethics of Heritage, one must be reminded of the fullness and variety of the inheritance they receive.

Though members of modern society “mostly do not inherit [their] livelihood,” the fact remains that we still “live from an ‘inheritance’, on several different levels in fact – life in itself first of all.”⁷⁰ Without the reproductive process that parents go through to

64 Ibid., 154.

65 Ibid. Quoted from Emmanuel Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*.

66 “Inheritance,” in *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus* (Cambridge University Press, December 25, 2024), <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/inheritance>.

67 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 173.

68 Ibid., 165.

69 Ibid., 169.

70 Ibid., 178.

produce offspring, that offspring obviously would not exist. Every single human being is a result of this process, receiving the gift of life from their parents. However, life in itself cannot be sustained in a vacuum. According to Sokol, “human life must take place in society” to provide parents and children with sufficient resources and assistance needed to survive. The “tried and tested environment” that “we have ‘inherited’”⁷¹ is given freely as a gift. Though “we do [as an example], in one way or another, pay for a specific medical procedure, the very institution of medicine, with its sum of knowledge and experience, has been passed down to us for free. [...] We only pay those who maintain and practice them.”⁷² This does not only apply to medicine. Millennia of human knowledge has been passed down for us to inherit and build upon. This gift is not one that man is the “‘master and owner’ of.” Instead, man is “rather the heir to a fortune which he has taken upon himself and which he in due course should pass on to those who come after him.”⁷³ This cultural wealth (our inheritance) exists because those who inhabited society in its long line of lineage acted “as guardians and intermediaries of life,”⁷⁴ building and preparing society for its future by preserving what must be kept and facilitating change to improve what was once there. Modern man must follow the lead of their ancestors, continuing the heritage of the society they depend on. In other words, the inheritance man receives must be left as an inheritance for those who come after. These “modern societies are based on an immeasurable wealth of experience, knowledge, and wisdom, of which the younger generation must somehow partake,”⁷⁵ cementing socialization as an indispensable strategy to enable the learning and passing on of the essential skills that enable such societies to exist (such as “learning to look after ourselves, learning established patterns of behaviour, and of course, our mother tongue”⁷⁶). As children, people become heirs to life and society. They inherit all they need to survive in said society through socialization, be it from parents, peers, or other educational institutions that occur within society. It necessarily follows that these children, as they grow into adults, must become the stewards of this inheritance, caring for it and fostering it within the children of the following generation.

71 Ibid., 181.

72 Ibid., 182.

73 Ibid., 178.

74 Ibid., 180.

75 Ibid., 186.

76 Ibid., 180.

It was hinted in previous paragraphs that part of man's inheritance is society. This society is constructed through various institutions ("universally practised, or socially recognized and within the given culture passed on mode of behaviour") and organizations ("the manner in which we coordinate our activities"⁷⁷), thus leaving them as our inheritance. Unfortunately, these important aspects of society face a certain "danger" that must be recognized by everyone: "the sweeping disdainful indifference, which is precisely what makes it impossible for them not to function properly."⁷⁸ Institutions and organizations "should be passed on, developed, criticized, and transformed to suit the changing times,"⁷⁹ which requires a deep level of care from each individual. Though it cannot all be sustained by one individual or group, each person has the responsibility to care for a portion of it so its entirety is passed on as an inheritance through a collective effort of preservation and improvement. Each person "should pay closer attention to public institutions – offering criticism."⁸⁰ If one person with a keen eye can detect a failure of an institution because they paid attention, they can have the power to mobilize others and share their knowledge in order to spread the notion of care for what we have inherited and the responsibility to leave it as a better inheritance. The universal experience of life should fill us with a great gratitude for what each person is given. This gratitude leaves us with a universal responsibility to care for and improve it for those who come after. Part of this care is for the society, institutions, and organizations that come with it as an inheritance. Such responsibilities are universal and undeniable, yet many forget to acknowledge this fundamental aspect of human life. Jan Sokol reminds us to give these aspects deeper consideration, which can only lead to a better future for all.

77 Ibid., 194. The text is quoting Petrušek, *Velký sociologický slovník 1*, p. 435, and Keller, *Uvod do sociologie*, p. 71, respectively.

78 Ibid., 231.

79 Ibid., 232.

80 Ibid., 234.

4: Distinction from Opposing Philosophies

Any practical philosophy that is meant to be implemented by society must be able to distinguish itself and stand its own from opposing worldviews. Jan Sokol’s work challenges many ideas and could be held under the scrutiny of a vast amount of philosophies, and thus must be able to stand its own philosophical grounds. Nonetheless, no philosophy is perfect, and no practical ethic should remain unquestioned. Even Sokol himself advocates for criticism of the institutions we take for granted, and urges others to consider ideas with a critical glance and form their own opinions. In a post-modern world where we have become disillusioned by traditional thought and weary of all institutions and ideas, the idea of a universal ethic as a baseline can be seen as not only a societal impossibility, but also overstepping the bounds of one’s authority. However, the inheritance of life itself and the society, values, and responsibility cannot be denied.

While modern humanity depends on modern institutions and organization, it is hard to deny the harm they have caused in the past. How can we trust these aspects of society not to coerce people with animal-like training into so-called “good behaviour” through fear and oppression? Many public organizations are seen as imposed upon us involuntarily, whether through taxes or by forceful constraints of the law. How does Sokol compensate for the lack of freedom involved in depending on institutions and paying taxes? Finally, the criticism of considering certain forms of lobbying to act against Sokol’s view of corruption is addressed. When does lobbying go too far, and how can it be stopped? This chapter will focus primarily on aspects of Jan Sokol’s ideas that show its distinction from these pre-existing values.

4.1: The Issue of Moral Relativism

One of Sokol’s core goals with the Ethics of Heritage was to create a universal practical philosophy. The modern philosophical landscape, however, has developed the view that “moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint” and has adopted “the denial that there are universal moral values shared by every human society,”⁸¹ opposing the values that are brought forth by centuries of tradition. Closely paired with this idea is cognitive relativism, which ascribes the same criticism to the idea

81 “Moral Relativism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” accessed June 17, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/moral-re/>.

of truth as a whole. This use of relativity denies traditional morality based on a set moral code, and claims that “no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others.” In taking away this basis of universal truth, the judgment of morality is left to “our beliefs, perceptions, values, and assumptions—in other words, when it is rationally acceptable or appears justified according to our general conceptual scheme.”⁸² This creates an environment where one can freely express and believe one’s own truth without influence from the outside world, but it also “relativizes ‘everything’ as it relates to them.” This creates an environment where “[people] see themselves as omnipotent judges.”⁸³ In these assertions, it appears that Sokol’s proposition of developing a universal ethic is impossible. Though such a standpoint cannot deny that the Ethics of Heritage is true for some, this ethic was designed to be applied to all people. Proponents of moral relativism view many of the values we once considered to be truths as a harmful form of “ethnocentrism characteristic of the colonial era”⁸⁴ in order to assimilate foreign populations into a way of life that benefits the power of the colonizers and marginalizes the colonized. Jan Sokol, however, aimed to “meet the urgent need for common starting points of fundamentals of a universal and *panhuman* morality.”⁸⁵ Thus another issue must be defended: do the Ethics of Heritage provide a Eurocentric view on how to act?

Jan Sokol was familiar with moral relativism and recognizes the existence of relativistic standpoints. As shown in his presidential candidacy, Sokol was not one to enforce moral values based solely on his own worldview. Thus, part of his philosophy relies on individuals basing their choices on their own experience and evaluation. Where this standpoint differs from absolute relativism is that Sokol’s idea of interpreting one’s own moral values requires a *basis* to be valid. This idea can best be described using Sokol’s example of measuring the weight of objects. Even though “we may not agree on what is light and what is heavy,” it still holds true that “objects are either lighter or heavier than other objects,” and that “the scales we use to demonstrate the ratio (or relativity) of these objects are themselves not relative.”⁸⁶ In other words, if a person were to pick up a pencil that weighs five kilograms, they would likely call it heavy. If that same person were to lift a vehicle that weighs fifty kilograms, they would be inclined to call it light. If a

82 Ibid.

83 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 72.

84 “Moral Relativism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.”

85 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 9.

86 Ibid., 69.

friend who sees the world from a purely objective standpoint were watching and listening to the person lifting these objects, that friend may consider the lifter crazy for calling the heavier object light and the lighter object heavy. The lifter, however, would argue back that in relation to the average weight of a pencil, five kilograms *is* heavy, while in relation to the average weight of a car, fifty kilograms *is* light. Though the two friends “may not agree on what is light and what is heavy,” they can agree that “objects are either lighter or heavier than other objects” because “the scales we use to demonstrate the ratio (or relativity) of these objects are themselves not relative.”⁸⁷

Sokol relates the above metaphor of weight measurement and the scale to the justice system. Laws are created as a general backbone that ensures safety and survival for societies and their inhabitants, but many different factors greatly affect the judgment received by the perpetrator. The bases of these judgments are based upon universal laws that apply to all members of the society. It is agreed upon that if something has a negative effect on the people around them, a negative punishment must be levied upon the perpetrator. This is essential in creating a society, as one “which does not guard against deviations ceases to be a society, and dissolves like a sugar cube.”⁸⁸ The harmful deviations, mainly those which consist in breaking the law, create a set offence that does not change. However, the severity of the offence may come under scrutiny, relative to the context of the crime and its circumstance. Though the crime still exists based on the laws agreed on by society, the severity of these punishments is based on the relative position of the crime in relation to its nature, the circumstances of the crime, and history of the perpetrator. This relative view of justice only works in society because it still measures against an objective existence of civil law that applies to all people within that society. To hearken back to Sokol’s metaphor of the weight scale, if “no standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others” in the court of law, then “not only is there nothing that can be called ‘absolutely’ light or heavy, but there are not even any scales we can use to tell the difference.” Sokol continues, stating, “if everything is merely relative, there is no basis for evaluation or judgment.”⁸⁹ For example, a thief would be able to argue that he needed the money and was just in using force to take it from an unwilling party, while the victim could argue that it is unjust to forcefully take another man’s private property no matter the circumstances. In a purely relativistic court, both standpoints would be considered equally

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., 70.

89 Ibid.

valid, and no action would be taken. By introducing the inarguable (within said nation state) law that theft is illegal, the victim's position would become privileged to that of the thief, causing his crime to be objective while his punishment would remain relative to other facts of the case. This proves that a civil society *cannot* depend purely on a relativistic standpoint to uphold its position as a society.

Individual morality, however, cannot be purely governed by law, and practical philosophy “cannot permit any absolute authority.”⁹⁰ How, especially facing disdain from relativism, can Sokol aim for a universal and panhuman philosophy? Taking a deeper look into the core goals of Sokol's Ethics of Heritage, it is apparent that this is not a fatal flaw. One of Sokol's goals is to “contribute to a more lucid distinction between morally significant phenomena, in order that we may think and talk about them more precisely meaningfully.”⁹¹ This is not an absolute authority of morality, but instead the tools necessary to evaluate the idea of morality. Sokol is not *creating* “a universal and panhuman morality,” but instead *searching for* “common starting points or fundamentals” of this morality. Sokol is building a universal way that people can thrive in systems that attempt to create these fundamentals by building a basis of not only how to live within “the altered situation in which we, as acting people, find ourselves today,” but also how to influence these systems to better promote justice. Jan Sokol's “philosophical, universal aim,” to understand “what needs to be considered by everybody in his or her actions, and why,”⁹² creates an undeniable basis (or universal scale) that everyone can use to evaluate their actions. Pure relativity depends too much on the individual, removing one's universal responsibility for life; both one's own life, and life as a whole.

Part of this universal starting point to the consideration of panhuman morality is the undeniable fact of life and the responsibility that comes with it. Though not all people may agree on what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, the decision of what is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ can easily be related to this universal fact. The Ethics of Heritage is distinct from pure relativism because it provides a basis for all to consider, giving every individual a compelling argument to base their moral beliefs upon. Every individual who has ever lived was given that life from their parents. This life comes with the universal responsibility to care for it in a way that upholds it for future generations. With modern Western societies, the added gift of culture, institutions, and organizations is added to one's inheritance and is not excluded

90 Ibid., 83.

91 Ibid., 9.

92 Ibid.

from one's responsibility to care for it. These ideas, described in far more detail in chapter three, are undeniable and must be considered by all for society (and life within it) to improve. This does not mean that inheritance should "substitute ordinary, indivisible human morality."⁹³ In using this responsibility as a basis, we are provided with the moral traditions and values that have been "nurtured by religious movements and philosophical schools for millennia."⁹⁴ Existence is a fact, and the responsibility to enrich that existence (and what exists around you), including many of the cultural and moral traditions, is a fantastic starting point to measure what one should or should not do.

4.2: Institutions as a Cause of Harm

Jan Sokol's philosophy holds institutions and organizations as a fundamental aspect of his Ethics of Heritage, enough so that they appear in the title of his book. Institutions, according to Sokol, "are after all cultural products, too, and therefore should be passed on."⁹⁵ The Ethics of Heritage urges people to understand culture as an inheritance, and thus have a responsibility to care for it. He also, however, concedes that "the majority of seriously large-scale villainy has been committed and is still committed by organizations."⁹⁶ Sokol himself had witnessed this first-hand, stating that "this period also witnessed brutal, murderous regimes, such as Stalin's USSR, Pol-Pot's Cambodia and Pinochet's Chile."⁹⁷ Sokol also acknowledges the atrocities done by Fascist Germany, citing the tragic case of Adolf Eichman, who "became a symbol of the systematic genocide of European Jewry" by claiming "he was merely carrying out orders from issued by his superiors."⁹⁸ Clearly, institutions have a precedent to being massive detriments to society. If the Holocaust was "actually made possible by the terrifying discipline of hundreds of diligent officials"⁹⁹ in obeying the institutions that had power, how can anyone support the idea of allowing such powerful entities to exist in the first place?

93 Ibid., 235.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., 232.

96 Ibid., 230.

97 Sokol, "Dictatorship to Democracy," 1.

98 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 222.

99 Ibid. In reference to Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Michel Foucault, a philosopher who had a deep interest in analyzing the relationship of power versus knowledge and liberty, questioned the power that is granted to institutions and the social norms that they create in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.¹⁰⁰ Foucault claims that “the art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power,” aims to make students in schools “be subjected to subordination [and] docility,” “differentiates individuals from one another” in a way that “hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the nature of individuals,” and limits freedom by creating a “constraint of a conformity that must be achieved.”¹⁰¹ Thus, according to Foucault, an institution that modern society depends on severely undermines these societies by imposing “The Normal,”¹⁰² training individuals like animals to behave for their masters with the constant fear of surveillance. The cultural inheritance of social norms, enforced by institutions, becomes “a principle of coercion” and a “great instrument of power.”¹⁰³ Freedom and equality are undermined, further creating a dynamic of the ruler and the ruled. With these criticisms in mind, it is apparent how governmental institutions can harbour such terrifying power. Normalizing a society to negative values via rules and punishments, both in schools and with the threat of prison, could easily lead to an environment of general docility in preventing societal injustice. The hierarchy created through the classification of these social norms fertilizes the grounds for harmful “us” versus “them” mentalities, further moving populations to take active roles in these injustices. It appears, according to these observations, that eliminating these institutions altogether would prevent such disasters.

Though the criticism presented by Foucault seems harsh, it still does not weaken Sokol’s claims about the importance of institutions. In fact, the act of this critique itself proves the Ethics of Heritage in a unique, and perhaps unexpected, way. Sokol’s quote in the first section endorsing the passing on of institutions has a caveat: they must also be “developed, criticized, and transformed to suit the changing times.”¹⁰⁴ Sokol further asserts that “nobody questions the need to criticize public institutions: they often deserve criticism.”¹⁰⁵ In criticizing the way schools impact students and societies, Foucault was

100 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1995).

101 Ibid., 138.

102 Ibid., 139.

103 Ibid.

104 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 232.

105 Ibid., 233–34.

fostering a better future for society, upholding his responsibility as an heir of the systems he was born in. The modern education system has been altered (in some countries) due partially to Foucault's critiques. One clear example of this is the current education curriculum in Ontario, Canada, which calls for students to "recognize discrimination and promote principles of equity, human rights, and democratic participation."¹⁰⁶

Countries that have not updated their education system to avoid becoming a way to enforce harmful social norms and coercion into becoming docile are in even more need of Sokol's ethics. Though the idea of a docile population against a government that may be seen to be too powerful to fight may seem terrifying, there is precedence to such a system being resolved. A precedence that Sokol witnessed himself, as explored in the second chapter of this thesis. As it is apparent by the fall of the Soviet Union, these powerful institutions can indeed change due to the criticism and efforts of dissidents that Sokol calls for in his *Ethics of Heritage*. By perpetuating this cultural institution of dissent, the political institution of the Communist regime was defeated. This surprised Sokol at the time, which may have built his hope for the possibility of improving society with his ethics. The fall of this regime is clear evidence that Jan Sokol's methods of criticizing and improving institutions, sometimes over the course of generations, remains valid. Individual morality, when used effectively and perpetuated through heritage, is a powerful tool against seemingly unstoppable forces.

4.3: The Issue of Freedom

Freedom is imperative for humans to truly live. The removal of freedom on a mass scale has a severely adverse effect upon a society, as seen with the previous example of Communism. Thus, deep consideration of freedom is essential in building a universal ethic. Jan Sokol agrees that "freedom is of the utmost importance,"¹⁰⁷ but also determines that "the freedom of others is a threat to my own."¹⁰⁸ Thus, "genuine human freedom – that is, freedom among people and in society – is always 'limited' [...] because it needs rules."¹⁰⁹ Finding the balance between freedom and control has often been a deeply explored

106 "Government of Ontario's Curriculum and Resources," accessed June 16, 2024,

<https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/transferable-skills/global-citizenship-and-sustainability>.

107 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 234.

108 Ibid., 53.

109 Ibid., 51.

problem in human societies. It does not help that “an employee does not act in his or her capacity, but fulfills tasks given out by someone else.”¹¹⁰ The hindrance to freedom in these circumstances could be seen as a slippery slope, as it may seem unknown how far the limitations may go. This is the topic of many debates. One fascinating proposal of a solution to the problem of freedoms being taken away by public and private institutions is that of anarchy, which prioritizes freedom over most other values.

The ideas presented by anarchist groups are vastly diverse. Some groups believe in the abolition of property, while others hold private property as the ultimate form of freedom. There are extensive debates, for example, between anarcho-communists and anarcho-capitalists. Some schools of thought only want anarchy to allow for the creation of smaller regimes that do not conform to a wider government. According to Anselme Bellegarrigue in his *Anarchist Manifesto*,¹¹¹ “anarchy is the negation of governments.”¹¹² It calls into question taxation, and deems it as “usury (the inescapable result of financial monopoly).”¹¹³ While those who support government state that taxation ensures the existence of public schools, roads, and universal healthcare, Bellegarrigue claims that these services would still naturally exist due to “industry, production, commerce, the people’s affairs and the interests of the multitude.” With taxation, these factors “cannot flourish.”¹¹⁴ If taxation is seen as something that “I will end up paying for” despite the fact that “I attend neither Mass, nor service, nor feast,”¹¹⁵ taxation is seen as a bigger threat to one’s resources than simply creating and maintaining these essential services themselves. Similar to the previous criticism of institutions being evil, Bellegarrigue calls into question the corruption and control that governments have over its people and opposes the idea of giving up any freedoms in order to be rewarded safety. Bellegarrigue further claims that the laws created to ensure safety only “trespass against my liberty,” and justice will be protected “through safeguarding of personal interests.”¹¹⁶ If one’s personal involvement is protecting themselves from harm in any ways necessary, it is thus a potential attacker’s

110 Ibid., 208.

111 A. Bellegarrigue, *Anarchist Manifesto* (Kate Sharpley Library, 2002).

112 Ibid., 1.

113 Ibid., 12.

114 Ibid., 19.

115 Ibid., 18. In this case, the Mass is used as a surrogate for public institutions that the author did not want to use, and thus did not want to pay for. At the time the Manifesto was written, the Church was directly funded by the State.

116 Ibid., 5.

personal interest to leave the person alone to ensure survival. After all, if someone knows that attempting to rob someone else's property would likely lead to their death, it is in their best personal interest not to commit that act.

Through this view, it may seem as though Jan Sokol's view of upholding governmental institutions is not compatible with this brand of anarchism. It still does not stand as a valid criticism to the Ethics of Heritage, even if one adheres to Bellegarrigue's values. Sokol's ideas relating to how one must uphold cultural heritage, and institutions as an aspect of this culture, must still be upheld by those who deny the role of governments. Due to the fact that governments still exist in society, anarchists who agree with these theories must find a way to exist within them. Sokol's ethics can act as a way for them to foster this existence, as it offers valuable insight into how one can make the changes necessary in society without negating it completely, as can be seen in chapter 4.4. In this case, the solution to what is perceived as a harmful institution is creating a new one that opposes it. This causes them to create their own institutions to uphold their values and provide a way to sustain their values. Bellagarrigue implicitly agrees with this notion, calling for a "functional mechanism, a chancellery formed at the instigation of self-regulating communities." This creates "an institution answerable to the community."¹¹⁷ If such an institution did exist, it still "can only take hold if [it] somehow become[s] stabilized and ensure[s its] own reproduction."¹¹⁸ To secure a future of freedom for the coming generations, anarchists must pass on this institution, creating an inheritance of their own. These future generations then have the responsibility to maintain their freedom within the community for the generation that follows. The core value of Sokol's philosophy is thus upheld. Life and the society it comes with is still an inheritance that people have the responsibility to uphold.

It is important, as well, to compare ideological differences of freedom between Sokol and anarchy (or in this case, a relative of anarchy: libertarianism). According to Murray Rothbard in *For A New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*, "freedom is a condition in which a person's ownership rights in his own body and his legitimate material property are not invaded, are not aggressed against."¹¹⁹ This includes and absence of coercion, whether from the state or the general majority. Sokol, though he does agree with

117 Ibid.

118 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 194.

119 Murray Newton Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1978), 50.

Rothbard on some of his ideas of freedom, takes a far more moderate view of freedom. Sokol simply defines it as being “no more than an arena of possibilities, the opportunity to act (or not act) in accordance with our own judgments and decisions.”¹²⁰ Sokol allows for freedom to consider “choosing between options which are presented to us by others.”¹²¹ This view considers the responsibility that people have to others, and leaves more room to develop personal morality and ethics that allows for greater cooperation among members of society. This is in part because “we live in ever more complex dependencies on thousands of other, mostly anonymous people, without whom we would not be able to manage.”¹²² Rothbard, on the other hand, considers society to be “an abstraction that does not actually exist” that should not “own land or any other property in common”¹²³ and that “people’s talents, health, and beauty” are “nature- or God-given,” which is “given to individuals and not to ‘society,’”¹²⁴ thus making an individual the sole owner of the fruits of his labour. Such a negation of public institutions would harm the services people inherit that they depend on, such as universal healthcare in the countries where it is offered. For a free economy such as Rothbard’s to survive, Sokol calls for “public institutions [to] provide a framework of certain basic conditions: peace, security of the individual and property, effective law enforcement, a stable currency and many other conditions, which must, in principle, be kept separate from the profit motive.”¹²⁵ By separating public institutions from the profit motive that Rothbard’s ideas depend on, long-term benefits can be prioritized over short-term profit. To reconcile the loss of freedom caused by society and public institutions, Sokol encourages people to live in a dual mode: “On the one hand, our ancestors won for us our privileges of individual freedom (available, ideally, to all); but on the other hand, the indispensable division of labour compels us to combine our individual freedoms in large-scale, fixed organizations.”¹²⁶ Recognizing such organizations is important for ensuring they can be handed down; to ensure future generations do not lose this inheritance that people depend upon.

120 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 56.

121 Ibid., 46.

122 Ibid., 238.

123 Rothbard, *For a New Liberty*, 41.

124 Ibid.

125 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 231–32.

126 Ibid., 234.

4.4: Lobbying as Legalized Corruption

Jan Sokol places a large amount of thought into dealing with corruption. Corruption, according to Sokol, is “the misuse of entrusted assets and powers to gain unlawful privilege.” He adds one important stipulation: that “corrupt actions must always be conducted covertly.”¹²⁷ He posits that “the best remedy to counter corruption is therefore transparency.”¹²⁸ Thus, frameworks are put into place for private institutions to legally influence the policies and decisions made by public institutions. There is, however, a “lack of a clear-cut distinction between lobbying and corruption, between the general phenomenon of special interests trying to gain influence with parts of the public sector and some of its special manifestations.”¹²⁹ This lack of distinction, in the eyes of the public, severely erodes trust in these institutions that society depends on. In fact, “an increasing number of Americans believe that government is run to serve a few large interests rather than for the benefit of all.”¹³⁰ This skepticism exists due to the effects of lobbying, as corporations are able to provide money to governments in order to sway massive political changes that the common people can have limited impact on. A further level of criticism to the existence of lobbying is the level of inequality that it creates. Lobbying has a high barrier of entry and does not including those who lack funds to either influence policies themselves or fight against harmful policies that come from this lobbying. In fact, “smaller groups lack the resources to cover the high fixed costs of a lobbying organization.”¹³¹ If “the inventiveness of corruption seems almost limitless,”¹³² could the existence of lobbying simply be an innovative method of legalizing corruption? Since Sokol’s ethics heavily rely upon the validity of institutions and the avoidance of corruption, this idea could severely undermine his assertions.

127 Ibid., 224.

128 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*.

129 Nauro F. Campos and Francesco Giovannoni, “Political Institutions, Lobbying and Corruption,” *Journal of Institutional Economics* 13, no. 4 (December 2017): 917–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137417000108>.

130 “Lobbying, Special Interests and ‘Buying’ Influence: What Research Tells Us, and Remaining Unanswered Questions,” *The Journalist’s Resource* (blog), September 4, 2014, <https://journalistsresource.org/politics-and-government/influence-interest-groups-public-policy-outcomes/>.

131 Ibid.

132 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 225.

One can argue that “individual choices involved in the price system and in a single form of centralized decision-making” constitutes as “pure democracy,”¹³³ indicating that people vote for companies they choose to perpetuate by giving them the funds to do so via the open market, as a customer. This argument is very appealing, as corporations that do not receive money cannot use that money for unethical lobbying. Sokol addresses this by mentioning that “the success” of these organizations is “determined by the decency of the actions of each and every one of them.”¹³⁴ If a company does something that is deemed to be harmful for society, people will not purchase from them. In turn, their ability to effectively lobby the government will disappear. One example of this method actively working was in 1977, when Nestle was accused of “getting third world mothers hooked on formula,” using deceptive marketing models that “creat[ed] a need where none existed” and “link[ed] products with the most desirable and unattainable concepts – then giving a sample.”¹³⁵ Nestle infiltrated hospitals by giving out “freebies like formula and baby bottles” and spent “untold millions of dollars subsidizing office furnishings, research projects, gifts, conferences, publications, and travel junkets of the medical profession,” which allegedly caused “millions of babies [to] die from malnutrition.”¹³⁶ Due to a boycott called for by the Infant Formula Action Coalition, the World Health Organization created the International Code of Marketing Breast-Milk Substitutes, which prevented Nestle (and baby formula in general) from directly influencing hospitals into advertising their products.¹³⁷

Thus, the harmful effects of lobbying can be mitigated by incorporating aspects of Sokol’s philosophy. Sokol calls for institutions to adopt a general morality “which must, in principle, be kept separate from the profit motive.”¹³⁸ This calls for the need to “search for ways to improve [society’s] functionality without the automatic pressure of economic competition.”¹³⁹ One way to ensure that injustices, such as Nestle utilizing public institutions to ensure more people depended on their baby formula to the detriment of their

133 James M. Buchanan, “Individual Choice in Voting and the Market,” *Journal of Political Economy* 62, no. 4 (1954): 334.

134 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 218.

135 Jill Krasny, “Every Parent Should Know The Scandalous History Of Infant Formula,” *Business Insider*, accessed June 17, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/nestles-infant-formula-scandal-2012-6>.

136 *Ibid.*

137 *Ibid.*

138 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 232.

139 *Ibid.*

own health, is to ensure that people “pay closer attention to public institutions – offering criticism.”¹⁴⁰ Once this corruption is noticed, Sokol provides two possible solutions to the issue: “to further specify the rules and regulations” at the risk of “mak[ing] people ‘unlearn’ responsibility,” and “to strengthen independent assiduity and responsibility – by providing further qualifications, good salaries, a guarantee of steady employment, and so on.”¹⁴¹ If corporations and public institutions find “an ideal balance between the two strategies,”¹⁴² both enforcing rules and promoting individual responsibility, corruption and lobbying against the interest of the people can be severely diminished. Beyond that, such practices also encourage greater motivation and productivity from the employees. This responsibility can also be furthered by normalizing it within schools before individuals take part in greater institutions (this will be explored more thoroughly in chapter 5.2 in relation to care for the environment, but it also applies here). With this further development of personal morality, employees are “not living tools in the hands of their employer,” but instead “remain free, and therefore responsible, human beings.”¹⁴³ With this responsibility comes the imperative to ‘blow the whistle’ on unjust practices. Someone who can achieve this “is often the only one who can save the whole society from serious damage.”¹⁴⁴ If organizations are hiding hurtful practices from governments or societies, “only insiders and experts who are willing to divulge such secrets to the media and the public – clearly crossing all institutional lines – can hope to remedy this situation.”¹⁴⁵ These strategies transcend the confines of lobbying and apply to corruption, unlawful institutions, and unjust practices of organizations.¹⁴⁶

140 Ibid., 234.

141 Ibid., 227–28.

142 Ibid., 228.

143 Ibid., 222–23.

144 Ibid., 223.

145 Ibid.

146 “Unlawful” in this context is referring to breaking the law behind closed doors. “Unjust practices” refer to practices that act against the agreed-upon interests of the general public.

5: Practical Application of Sokol's Philosophy

This chapter will attempt to reach into the future, applying Sokol's ethics to modern problems in a way that is essential for future generations. It will also look beyond the text itself, using it as a basis to explore other applications of its ideas. The growing world of technological institutions has a large amount of the opacity that fertilizes corruption. Adopting free and open source software and protocols can help translate Sokol's ethics into the technological world. On top of that, the seemingly rapid degeneration of the environment we live in offers chances for the Ethics of Heritage to be deeply tested and applied somewhere it is severely needed. The world is always changing, so an ethic that cares so deeply about the future should be able to be adapted into unique new iterations of societal evolution. Furthermore, an evaluation of *Ethics, Life, and Institutions* based on the goals Jan Sokol set for himself will use standpoints from this thesis in order to prove that Sokol has successfully achieved his goals. It will also reiterate the assertion that the Ethics of Heritage stands as a viable basis for a panhuman morality, with the addition of evaluating strong moral standpoints on an individual level.

5.1: Technological Inheritance

As explored in previous chapters, modern society relies heavily upon institutions. These institutions often depend on technology, especially the internet and modern electronic hardware. The purchase of food requires a cash register. The transport of goods requires a digital bureaucratic framework to ensure functionality and efficiency. Even this dissertation itself was written on a computer's word processor and printed using modern technology, creating a highly efficient and convenient way to do work while ensuring that the text is fully legible. Information technology and its components have themselves become inescapable institutions that oversee large portions of our lives, documenting more information about us than many of us can even comprehend. Many practices within technological companies push the boundaries of morality or are taken for granted as something that must only take place in the background. Utilizing Sokol's Ethics of Heritage is essential for mitigating the harm that could be caused by such life changing tools, while ensuring the positive effects leave a bright future for the coming generations.

There is more at stake than the material aspects of our dependence upon technology. Sokol states that "cultural evolution" is something which "occurs primarily

through the medium of language and human communication.”¹⁴⁷ This communication is massively aided by the internet and the social media platforms that we use. A vast majority of these are closed to us in many ways, and we depend on whistleblowers in order to discover vicious tactics that are being used. In 2018, the popular social media platform Facebook was discovered to have had “special arrangements with more than 150 companies to share its members' personal data.”¹⁴⁸ Most egregiously, this gave three third-party applications (Netflix, Spotify, and the Royal Bank of Canada), the ability to “read, write and delete users' private messages and see all participants on a chat thread”¹⁴⁹ without the users' knowledge. In his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*,¹⁵⁰ Nicholas Carr discovers that Google uses “exhaustive statistical and psychological research” to alter their services in order to influence what the users see on their search engine, and “doesn't believe that the affairs of citizens are best guided by experts,” instead depending on a “software algorithm.”¹⁵¹ This algorithm is largely not available for public scrutiny, and neither are a majority of the third-party arrangements made by companies similar to Facebook. As explained in chapter 4.4, transparency is essential to eliminate harmful practices such as these within organizations. When our culture is inherited via communication, and a vast amount of that communication depends on opaque institutions, individuals lose the opportunity to conduct due diligence upon the spread of their own culture.

One important solution to this problem is free and open-source (hereby referred to as FOS) software. Closed-source software, such as the previously mentioned examples, are often funded by advertisements, and are owned, operated, and maintained by companies and individuals with limited input from outsiders. FOS software, on the other hand, is not only free to use, but also improves transparency by allowing all users to access the code that built it. If someone “cannot achieve [corruption] by regular or opens means,”¹⁵² then software institutions cannot continue their dishonest practices when the code they use to build them is available to the public. Additionally, FOS projects are highly collaborative, as

147 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 38.

148 “Facebook's Data-Sharing Deals Exposed,” December 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46618582>.

149 Ibid.

150 Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

151 Ibid., 151–52.

152 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 225.

any individual who knows how to code can leave a lasting legacy on these protocols by suggesting their own code to solve problems and add features. By doing this, people “learn to cooperate, and pool their resources, as human life has always demanded.”¹⁵³ This software becomes immutable as people create their own “forks” (new projects using the code base of a different project to create something custom) and distribute it in any way that they choose. It is necessary for these “cultural products” to be “passed on, developed, criticized, and transformed to suit the changing times.”¹⁵⁴ The FOS movement ensures that this process can be done by anyone efficiently.

FOS software also furthers the idea of technology as an inheritance. A majority of the information each social platform owns about us, such as the ideas we share and the data collected in the background to build up a digital fingerprint that determines our online reputations, is owned primarily by the platform it is hosted on. This information is gone if a company goes out of business. With FOS protocols, this information can be self-hosted by individuals and does not depend on the corporations to keep on storing the information to maintain their legacy. This preserves the acquired knowledge experienced through trial and error for future generations to learn from. When a program that functions well is made, “its sum of knowledge and experience [can be] passed down to us for free.”¹⁵⁵ Over time, we will start to see platforms and applications that directly learn from their previous iterations, similar to how modern philosophy and science builds upon the discoveries of its predecessors. This can mitigate the “information disparity” caused by the dichotomy of the “voluntary or involuntary users” and the “representatives and stewards.”¹⁵⁶

Additionally, using the FOS concept of public blockchains creates “a public history of transactions” in a way that “generate[s] computational proof of the chronological order of transaction[s],”¹⁵⁷ ensuring that this information can be audited by anyone. This technology can be implemented by organizations to prevent them from unjustly funnelling money into private bank accounts, accepting bribes, or overspending on policies that act against the citizens’ wills. Financial reports offered by governments, according to financial audits carried out on the Canadian government, “present information that is opaque,

153 Ibid., 52.

154 Ibid., 232.

155 Ibid., 182.

156 Ibid., 214.

157 Satoshi Nakamoto, “Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System,” n.d., 1.

misleading and late.”¹⁵⁸ Most of these transactions already occur electronically, so the only real change required would be modernizing the financial infrastructure to be more suitable and efficient. The wealth and comfort created by modern technological institutions and governments is “something that [we ourselves] should look after and one day bequeath to someone else,”¹⁵⁹ and an easy way to do this is by encouraging those who are interested to directly contribute to this infrastructure in an open and transparent way.

5.2: Consideration for the Environment

We are facing an era where environmental worry has become a foremost concern in the public consciousness. According to the United Nations’ State of the Environment Report, “Ocean heat content in 2023 was the highest annual value on record,” and “the long-term rate of sea-level rise has more than doubled since the start of the satellite record.”¹⁶⁰ While a scientific analysis of climate change is beyond the scope of this thesis, the philosophical implications of the climate anxiety it causes opens up an opportunity to explore how Sokol’s philosophy, especially regarding his understanding of life and responsibility, can have a positive impact on people in society. After all, Jan Sokol’s view of life “disabuses practical philosophy of modern-age anthropocentrism, renewing the notion of our belonging to, and solidarity with, the world.”¹⁶¹ In order to explore the practical application of Sokol’s ideas on this topic, the issue of climate anxiety must be further contextualized. According to a 2021 study on climate anxiety in young people containing a sample of 10 000 individuals from ten different countries found that “all countries reported a large amount of worry, with almost 60% saying they felt ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ worried about climate change,” while “more than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily lives.”¹⁶² To compound

158 William BP Robson and Nicholas Dahir, “The Right to Know: Grading the Fiscal Transparency of Canada’s Senior Governments, 2022” (CD Howe Institute), accessed June 13, 2024, <https://www.cdhowe.org/public-policy-research/right-know-grading-fiscal-transparency-canadas-senior-governments-2022-0>.

159 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 180.

160 Claire Ransom, “State of the Climate 2024,” n.d., 4. The record began in 1993.

161 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 236.

162 Caroline Hickman et al., “Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 5, no. 12 (December 1, 2021): 866, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3).

this issue, “negative thoughts, worry about climate change, and impact on functioning were all positively correlated and showed correlations with feelings of betrayal and negative beliefs about government response.”¹⁶³ It is apparent that climate anxiety may both hinder an individual’s ability to function within institutions and corrodes the trust that people have for their government. The study acknowledges that the inaction of government in relation to climate change “can be regarded as unjust and involving moral injury,”¹⁶⁴ thus further demanding philosophical discussion on this topic.

Jan Sokol directly mentions the importance of consideration for the environment in a way that complements the previously mentioned study. Sokol acknowledges that the environment is “endangered, and we are all endangered with it,” further stating that “this purpose-driven interest [in environmental care] has nevertheless awoken [...] an almost religious interest in nature here and now.”¹⁶⁵ With climate anxiety steadily on the rise, a philosophy that is compatible with environmental care is much needed. In fact, Jan Sokol and the authors of the study on climate anxiety have some key similarities of ideas. Jan Sokol places a majority of the responsibility upon institutions, claiming that the “instrumental character of environmental care” is “something that must be dealt with by global organizations,” but recognizes the “personal”¹⁶⁶ responsibility that could help lead to this change. The study agrees, positing that “action needs to particularly be taken by those in power,” who “can act to reduce stress and distress by recognizing, understanding, and validating the fears and pain of young people, acknowledging their rights, and placing them at the centre of policy making.”¹⁶⁷ Both ideas recognize the importance of change carried out by institutions (or the people within those institutions who have power), while also acknowledging the responsibility of each individual to voice their concerns. The key difference in Sokol’s philosophy, however, lies in his understanding of the “personal” responsibility.

According to Sokol, the impassioned response to climate change “uncovered the completely forgotten relationship to inheritance as to something irreplaceable which has been passed on to us and which sustains us.” He goes on further to state that the

163 Ibid., 870.

164 Ibid., 871.

165 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 201. Edited to improve brevity without compromising textual context.

166 Ibid.

167 Hickman et al., “Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change,” 871.

environment is “a ‘personal’ inheritance, which belongs to each and every one of us, whether we live surrounded by romantic landscapes or in a high-rise in an industrialized area.”¹⁶⁸ This explicitly links nature to Sokol’s “Heir and Steward” idea, as discussed in chapter three of this thesis. Since nature is freely inherited by us from the previous generation, we become heirs to this vast and generous gift. Thus, it has “been entrusted to us as to independently thinking and acting stewards.”¹⁶⁹ It naturally follows, as previously discussed, that members of society have the responsibility to uphold this gift so we can pass it on to future generations. After all, if “care for the environment” is an “indivisible” public asset that “we would want everyone to have access to,”¹⁷⁰ modern society would be doing a massive disservice to its predecessors by leaving them a world that becomes progressively less liveable. In fact, an article published by the World Economic Forum agrees, quoting the former New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark, who asserted that “Countries need to overhaul their approach to child and adolescent health, to ensure that we not only look after our children today but protect the world they will inherit in the future.”¹⁷¹ Sokol has addressed a pressing issue and has highlighted our responsibility to take action. This begs the question: what actions must be taken? Further reading into Sokol’s philosophy may provide some actionable solutions.

Culture continually evolves and creates new iterations of itself. The transmission of culture, according to Sokol, “allows for much quicker adaptation to a change of situation, devising, spreading and accepting new elements, as well as conscious and reflected selection among these.”¹⁷² In fact, “this specifically human aspect of our ‘heritage’ is also passed on, almost involuntarily, in a wondrous harmony of parental and educational care on the one hand, and the receptiveness of children on the other.”¹⁷³ Thus, the response to the situation of climate change must be integrated into our culture in order for positive habits to perpetuate. This can be introduced through education systems, both encouraged by parents and teachers. An ideal curriculum would “remind where and how (im)morality manifests itself in their everyday activities,” showing positive and negative environmental practices that should either be mimicked or discarded, and that these actions “cannot be weighed or measured” (because it is difficult to measure abstinence, and many of the

168 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 201.

169 Ibid.

170 Ibid., 232.

171 Wynes and Nicholas, “The Climate Mitigation Gap.”

172 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 191.

173 Ibid., 189.

effects will not be immediately visible), but still “wields a strong influence over us [and the environment] and sometimes actually impacts on measurable factors, too.”¹⁷⁴ These values should be taught in a way that can perpetuate to future generations, as the children who learn them would grow up to teach their own children the same values. In fact, some governmental organizations already agree with implementing environmental care as a social norm via education. According to a report based on Mitigation of Climate Change carried out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “social norms cannot only help in reducing a household’s absolute level of electricity use but also shift the time of use to periods when more renewable electricity is in the system,” and highlights the fact that “baby boomers are higher emitters than other generations.”¹⁷⁵ This is because, in part, “a positive relationship was found between general and carbon-specific knowledge and the attitude towards carbon-specific behaviours in US consumers,” leading to the fact that “the gain of environmental knowledge resulted in more environmentally favourable attitude among these high school students.”¹⁷⁶

Merely teaching future generations about positive environmental practices is only one aspect of how change can be introduced. A significant portion of environmental responsibility lies upon corporations, many of which have economic incentives to continue on a harmful path. Unfortunately, the “requirements of good actions cannot be formulated as generally valid and enforceable rules” despite the fact that “we can certainly not do without those.”¹⁷⁷ Thus, governments face issues in enforcing laws that mitigate harm caused by corporations. However, with a society more finely tuned to environmental care, Sokol sets a precedent for this to change. Sokol states, “because man alone is able to think, and to be responsible, he must take this responsibility upon himself even for those who do not speak.”¹⁷⁸ This shows that it is important to use our freedom to criticize the institutions that use the environment if we are in a position to do so, such as using our knowledge of

174 Ibid., 229. The round brackets were used by Sokol in this quote. The square brackets were added to link Sokol’s idea, in this case about encouraging morality in the workplace, to the idea of spreading environmental consciousness into the school curriculum for a similar result.

175 Shobhakar Dhakal et al., “Emissions Trends and Drivers,” in *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. Priyadarshi R. Shukla et al. (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 263, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157926.004>.

176 Ibid., 264.

177 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 223. Sokol’s use of “those” is referring to the enforceable rules.

178 Ibid., 22.

the institutions we work in to show the world what goes on behind the scenes. This knowledge and responsibility “must be first applied, and therefore interpreted, both in the context of the whole legal system and in terms of ‘good manners’, on which there must be a certain degree of social consensus.”¹⁷⁹ This leaves it up to people who would not otherwise have this knowledge to freely choose not to support these institutions, using our right to boycott to call for change. In a world where “reputation plays a key part” in the profitability of corporations, which “can be easily lost on the back of public scandal,”¹⁸⁰ children who grew up valuing the environment can hit polluting companies where it hurts: in their wallets. Citizens can also utilize their democratic rights to vote for officials who actively support positive practices in the environment through social responsibility without imposing too much power. Thus, care for the environment can seep into the corporations themselves, encouraging them to adopt positive practices.

5.3: Has Jan Sokol Achieved His Goal?

Jan Sokol aimed to contribute to the field of practical philosophy in a unique way by introducing his Ethics of Heritage. This chapter aims to explore Sokol’s goals as indicated in the introduction to *Ethics, Life, and Institutions: An Attempt at Practical Philosophy*. Though he recognizes that “the aim of the book is indeed not a modest one,”¹⁸¹ his arguments and ideas remind members of society to appreciate modern life for what it is. Modern discourse, especially on social media, tends to forget the privileges we have over our ancestors who lived in much more primitive times, and is constantly debating how we ought to live. Despite his lofty goals, Sokol admits that he is “not [...] able to solve all the questions, doubts, and disagreements that lie at the heart of these debates,”¹⁸² but instead aims “to point out what needs to be considered by everybody in his or her actions, and why.”¹⁸³ To achieve this “philosophical, universal aim of the book,”¹⁸⁴ Sokol set smaller

179 Ibid., 224. In this case, ‘good manners’ refers to the morality individuals must build that cannot be enforced by rules, but instead by encouraging a healthy cultural inheritance.

180 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 218.

181 Ibid., 8.

182 Ibid., 9.

183 Ibid.

184 Ibid.

goals for himself that work towards his aim. These goals will be scrutinized from the context of this thesis.¹⁸⁵

One of these goals was “to contribute to a more lucid distinction between morally significant phenomena, in order that we may think and talk about them more precisely and meaningfully.”¹⁸⁶ This is achieved in many ways. Primarily, the phenomena of our inherited life and all that comes with it receives vivid distinction and discussion. Gratitude for the gifts we inherit, be it life, society, or culture, reminds individuals of the essential responsibility to care for it, ensuring a healthy and long-lasting world that people can depend on for generations. Sokol also reconciles certain philosophical ideas that may seem to oppose each other. By showing the difference between relativism and objectivity, Sokol is able to find a healthy balance between the two worldviews. He reminds us of the importance of finding a universal basis for morality without enforcing said values, and presents differing ideas in easy to read and compelling ways. This helps the book to show you *how* to think without encroaching too far on *what* to think by showing compelling philosophies and allowing space for people to create their own individual morality. Through his experience in a communist, and later capitalist, Czechia, Sokol distinguishes the difference between freedom and responsibility for others in a very compelling way. The *Ethics of Heritage* helps to show when freedom is necessary, but also the importance of relinquishing it in order to accommodate for others.

Jan Sokol also aimed “to remind us of the altered situation in which we, as acting people, find ourselves today: an interconnected, globalized world in which institutions play an ever more important role.”¹⁸⁷ This is achieved by reminding us of our dependence on institutions and organizations to thrive within modern society. This dependence, however, goes both ways: in a massively globalized world, these institutions not only require people to uphold and participate in them, but also demand to be criticized and improved. By cementing these institutions as an inheritance, our responsibility to pay close attention to them helps us to provide checks and balances to their power if they attempt to reach too far. By building a personal set of morals, vigilant individuals can use their knowledge to whistleblow the wrongdoing of corporations or governments when they are corrupt, mobilizing people to incentivize these organizations to work towards more just practices.

185 One of these four goals has been omitted from this chapter due to being beyond the scope of this thesis.

186 Sokol, *Ethics, Life and Institutions*, 9.

187 Ibid.

One of these essential practices is care for the environment. Sokol reminds us that we exist on an Earth that we depend on for its natural resources: we belong both to and in solidarity with the world. One way the world has drastically changed in recent centuries is in the increasing anxiety of environmental destruction. Sokol does not let us forget this fact, and reminds us to care for our animal cousins and our own future generations. All of this assists us in orienting ourselves within the ever-changing world, and encourages us to make more informed decisions on how to act in this society.

The final goal was “to meet the urgent need for common starting points of a universal and panhuman morality.”¹⁸⁸ The Ethics of Heritage is a thoroughly convincing starting point for this goal. As Sokol states, “the ancient concept of ‘inheritance’ as the responsible handling of one’s life and the world can be found in virtually all human cultures.”¹⁸⁹ It has also been stated in this thesis previously that our existence and the responsibilities it comes with are undeniable, as every individual experiences it and would not exist without their many inheritances. Evaluating life on the basis of care and responsibility for the environment that we inherit is also present worldwide. Man’s solidarity with the Earth is “grounded so deeply in pre-human reality” that “it is not weighed down by any cultural exclusivity.”¹⁹⁰ These bases, however, “cannot relieve people of the need to make (or, for that matter, the pleasure and responsibility of making) their own moral evaluations and judgments.”¹⁹¹ This creates a firm basis that is not an imposition of morality, but instead an essential guide to assist in using one’s own freedom to create their own personal morality.

By meeting these goals, Sokol has easily demonstrated that he has achieved his main goal. Though the book is not a perfect solution to life, the universe, and everything, it still brings up valuable ideas that all people should consider. We should be grateful for our vast inheritance. Grateful enough to ensure it can be enjoyed for many generations to follow, no matter how many changes it must adapt to. Living in a world where luxuries, amenities, and necessities are within an arms-reach has allowed the population to boom. If our ancestors had not upheld and improved this world for us, such benefits of living would be far more difficult to come by. With the help of Jan Sokol, heritage “can no longer mean passing down a portion of land and customs within one family, but it should encompass all

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid., 236.

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid., 9.

that constitutes our daily lives and all that has been handed down to us through generations – primarily the language, culture, law, science, institutions, and organizations without which the relatively safe and comfortable life of the wealthy part of the modern world would be unthinkable.”¹⁹² Before transitioning to the conclusion, however, one last wish Jan Sokol had for his book was “that it may find readers who will take something from it.”¹⁹³ The mere existence of this thesis proves that it has.

192 Ibid., 238–39.

193 Ibid., 239.

6: Conclusion

Jan Sokol set out with a goal to create a universal basis of ethics to be considered by all, improving the way we see and view the surrounding society. This is a noble goal, but ultimately one that faces its own challenges. This dissertation aimed to answer whether Sokol's Ethics of Heritage, as proposed in *Ethics, Life, and Institutions: An Attempt at Practical Philosophy*, is universal and practical, and assessed whether Sokol has achieved his goals. Our inheritance encompasses a vast array of gifts that we are responsible to care for and pass on. We inherit life, the Earth, society, customs, language, knowledge, and helpful institutions and organizations. If our ancestors hadn't treated these gifts with care, they would cease to exist. Thus, it is our responsibility to reciprocate this care for future generations. This thesis explored the viability of these claims through four chapters: First, the influential aspects of Sokol's life that had an influence on his philosophy provided context for some of his ideas. The following chapter explained Sokol's implementation of the life sciences, the importance of gratitude and responsibility, and a description of Sokol's idea of inheritance. Afterwards, Sokol's ideas were compared to different philosophies that may seem to challenge his ideas, as well as the issue of lobbying as a possible form of corruption. The final chapter further explored practical applications of the Ethics of Heritage in our technological inheritance and our responsibility for the environment.

The Ethics of Heritage was deeply dissected in exploring the way Sokol's own life impacted his ideas. Sokol's propensity to living his own ethics in his time before and after communism not only expands the reader's understanding of the Ethics of Heritage, but also proves its own practicality by seeing these ethics in practice. Sokol's eventful life found him working menial labour, advancing to illegally studying philosophy and eroding the oppressive communist regime, and eventually running for president in a revolutionized nation, enshrining Sokol's balanced view of freedom, justice, and morality. By not forcing his own values onto others in his presidential campaign, Sokol showed that he is capable of displaying important ideas and philosophies in a way that allows people to make their own moral judgments.

Sokol's unique perspective on the life sciences neither fully separated man from animal, nor denied the unique responsibilities of humanity. Personal life and life as a whole, including the environment we depend on, were distinguished from each other in a

way that considered both our own personal lives and the lives of everything – and everyone – around us. Due to the gratitude of receiving life and all that comes with it, the responsibility to care for it and to pass it on applies to all people. This responsibility is aided by the development of judgmental skills to establish a personal morality. This personal morality is based not only on our responsibility for our inheritance, but also on the traditions and knowledge that comes from it. Our inheritance goes beyond physical assets from deceased relatives, and instead encompasses all that is in the world when we are brought into it. This is freely passed on to us, thus giving us the responsibility to reciprocate the care and evolution of society and its benefits. Institutions and organizations are an important part of this inheritance, and similarly require care to be passed on to future generations. These facts exist for all people, as all people exist and receive the inheritance of the Earth and its societies.

Sokol's views are able to distinguish themselves from seemingly opposing ideologies. Moral Relativism, in its most extreme form, denies the existence of a universal measurement of truth and morality. Sokol addresses this by pointing out the necessity for something to compare one's morality to. Without a universal guideline, there can be no relations. This eliminates the possibility of any and all measurement, which is not compatible with modern society. The Ethics of Heritage can stand as a guideline for this universal measurement, as long as the philosophies we have inherited inform this measurement. Though institutions have caused harm in the past and are likely to remain doing so, this is not an excuse to discard all institutions. Sokol's philosophy allows for the evolution of society to improve the institutions we depend on. The full negation of government and taxation found in some anarchist philosophies does not consider our dependence on public organizations and institution. Besides, if anarchists were to create their own sovereign state, they would still depend on values found in the Ethics of Heritage to ensure that their ancestors keep the freedom that anarchists would achieve. Additionally, Rothbard's view of freedom does not include the important value of responsibility for others. It similarly denies the modern reliance on institutions and the responsibility to maintain and improve them. Beyond anarchy, the possible downfalls of lobbying as a form of legalized corruption are mitigated by strategies shown by Sokol in his ethics. Vigilant members of society are able to expose unjust practices, beyond that of lobbying, which encourages others to advocate for change. The development of individual morality paired with the rule of institutional law further fertilizes these institutions for positive change.

A significant portion of the knowledge and infrastructure we inherit is via technology. In order to apply the Ethics of Heritage to this rapidly changing aspect of society, free and open source software could enable greater transparency in the services we rely on. This allows for greater scrutiny of companies and institutions that impact a significant portion of modern life, as well as allowing for a lower barrier of entry for direct contributions and improvements. Care for the environment, especially in such an anthropocentric society, is essential for all people to consider. Sokol's ethics reminds us of our responsibility to speak up for nature and ensure that we leave behind an inhabitable earth for those who come after us. Corporations can be held accountable with similar methods to the ones described when discussing lobbying. Including care for the environment into our cultural heritage complements those methods, ensuring that all generations are aware of the importance of the nature that surrounds us. Finally, Jan Sokol has achieved his goal in pointing out what needs to be considered by all. The Ethics of Heritage is cross-cultural and can assist in creating a starting point of a universal and panhuman morality. This morality also depends the knowledge that this heritage gives us, and is aided by the other ideas highlighted in this thesis.

Ultimately, Jan Sokol's contributions to our philosophical inheritance, though not earth-shattering on an international scale, provides valuable insight into life and the society we live in. It is simultaneously easy to read and thoroughly intriguing, with a strong potential to leave a lasting impact on those who read it. Though the Ethics of Heritage may have its flaws, its overall importance supersedes any ideas that may have been brushed over or missed. Sokol still allows the reader to come to their own conclusions inspired by a strong basis of compelling ideas. After recognizing the importance and beauty of the immense world we have inherited, one can only look forward to ushering in the coming generation with a gleam of optimism. Though history has had its ups and downs, the constant evolution of culture and society inspires dreams of development beyond a magnitude of our current imagination as our society grows through iteration after iteration, fuelled and cared for by our descendants.

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