Can a human society suffer from illness like a living thing? And if so, how does such a malaise manifest itself? In this thought-provoking book, Frederick Neuhouser explains and defends the idea of social pathology, demonstrating what it means to describe societies as “ill,” or “sick,” and why we are so often drawn to conceiving of social problems as ailments or maladies. He shows how Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim – four key philosophers who are seldom taken to constitute a “tradition” – deploy the idea of social pathology in comparable ways, and then explores the connections between societal illnesses and the phenomena those thinkers made famous: alienation, anomie, ideology, and social dysfunction. His book is a rich and compelling illumination of both the idea of social disease and the importance it has had, and continues to have, for philosophical views of society.

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DIAGNOSING SOCIAL PATHOLOGY

Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim

FREDERICK NEUHOUSER

Barnard College, Columbia University
Für Gene, das Gute in leiblicher und geistiger Gestalt
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Preface

When I began this project ten years ago, my plan was straightforward – and, as I now see, naive: I wanted to demonstrate the indispensability of the concept of social pathology for normative social philosophy and, by drawing mostly on resources from European thinkers from Rousseau onward, to articulate more precisely than had been done before how illness in the domain of the social ought to be conceived. My initial strategy for defending this concept was to consult contemporary philosophy of biology and medicine with the aim of finding a generally accepted account of sickness and health in biological organisms that would serve as the basis for arguing that analogous features of social life justified applying the concepts of health and illness to social phenomena. Two discoveries led me to revise my plan. The first was that contemporary philosophy of biology and medicine, no less discordant than other fields of philosophy, offered no uncontroversial account of health or illness that I could simply avail myself of in defending the idea of pathology in the social domain. Moreover, the controversies only increased when turning from purely physiological conceptions of health, applicable to nonhuman organisms, to conceptions of health appropriate to human beings. It is not only that in the human realm a new category appears – that of mental health – but also, and more interestingly, that, in contrast to the case of veterinary medicine, no full account of bodily health for humans can be given that abstracts from what I call (and explain below) the “spiritual” aspects of human beings. Although the account of social pathology I provide in this book is informed by ideas deriving from the philosophy of biology and medicine, I have had to decide for myself which aspects of the views on offer there belong to the best account of illness in human beings (and other animals) and shed the most light on what illness in the social domain might consist in.

The second discovery that led me to change my plan for this book was that, as I soon found when presenting my ideas in academic contexts – among contemporary philosophers, political theorists, and sociologists – resistance
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to the concept of social pathology is so entrenched that framing my task as an outright defense of that concept generated premature dismissals of my claims and unfruitful disputes that tended to reenact long-familiar academic debates rather than shed light on the phenomena that interested me. At the same time, when I described my project to nonacademics, I was greeted with a degree of enthusiasm I had never before experienced when trying to explain to “laypeople” what I wrote about as a philosopher. In earlier years my attempts to say something, when asked, about the self-positing subject, moral autonomy, or the conditions under which the will of a citizenry could be considered “general” and therefore binding for all had elicited mostly polite responses and not so lightly veiled (but understandable) attempts to change the topic of conversation. Suddenly, I discovered, nonacademics had some sense of what I was talking about and were eager to volunteer their own examples of ways in which society appeared to be ill. (Not surprisingly, this tendency increased dramatically in the United States after 2016, even if the political events that evoked this response merely made it no longer possible to ignore pathological conditions that had been developing for decades. Now the question is no longer whether that society is sick but whether it – especially its version of liberal democracy – is dying.)

What, I asked myself, did the responses of my fellow citizens, if not my fellow academics, say about the relevance of the concept of social illness?

These experiences changed my conception of my project. I decided to start from a fact about the discourse of social pathology that seems incontrovertible: beginning at least with Plato there appears to be an irresistible propensity among philosophers, social theorists, cultural critics, and journalists of very different outlooks – and not only in the West – to conceive of social problems and their solutions in terms of the vocabulary of illness, health, and cure. From Plato’s fevered polis (Plato 1992: 369–74e) to Shakespeare’s “something … rotten in the state of Denmark”1 to Machiavelli’s “hectic fevers” (or wasting disease) of the state2 to Hobbes’s infirmities of “the body politic” (boils, scabs, bulimia, rabies, epilepsy, parasitic worms3) to Frank Lloyd Wright’s description of “landlordism” as a social disease (Wright and Pfeiffer 2008: 418), thinkers of various epochs seem irresspressibly drawn to “illness as metaphor” in the domain of social philosophy (Sontag 1978: 74, 77, 78). Moreover, despite the fact

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1 Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, scene iv.
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that conceptions of physiological illness have varied greatly over the centuries, the tendency to think of social problems on the model of illness has remained strikingly resilient. ¹ My project, then, is an attempt to take seriously the indisputably widespread impulse to think of societies as susceptible to falling ill by trying to understand the powerful pull it exerts on our imagination and to assess what value the concept of social pathology might have, even when we reject the idea that human societies are simply biological organisms writ large.

With this starting point in view, a slightly different question came into focus: What does the irresistible urge to think in terms of illness when thinking about social problems say about the nature of human society? Or, posed in “ontological” terms: What kind of thing must human society be if it is vulnerable to falling ill? This book, then, is about the connection between social ontology ² and the discourse of social pathology, and its central claim is that we can learn something important about human social life by taking seriously past and present attempts to understand and criticize society using a vocabulary borrowed from medicine. Establishing this constitutes a limited defense of the concept of social pathology by showing that theorists who employ that concept have good reasons for turning to the language of illness; that their doing so is motivated not by a priori philosophical commitments but by empirical inquiry into the real phenomena of social life; and that conceiving of social problems as pathologies enables one to discover and think productively about aspects of social life that cannot be grasped by discourses confined to the categories of legitimacy, justice, or moral rightness, as typically (and narrowly) construed by most Anglo-American political philosophy.

As a result of these revisions of my project, its central argument is no longer that critical social philosophy must employ the language of social pathology but, more modestly, that there are good reasons for doing so and that an outright dismissal of that theoretical framework risks losing sight of important social phenomena that purely moral or political approaches to social life cannot capture. It is true that many of the critical concepts of

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¹ The metaphor of social illness is so widespread that one can find it in nearly every issue of a serious newspaper or treatise devoted to social issues. Two examples are Krugman (2019) and Mau (2019), which analyzes the problems of contemporary eastern Germany using the analogy of a bone fracture.

² A caveat: social ontology as pursued here is a less abstract project than many contemporary analytic philosophers take it to be, e.g., Gilbert (1986), Tuomela (2013), and Searle (1995). A good discussion of analytical social ontology can be found in Stahl 2013: ch. 4. My project is continuous with but still broader than the accounts of social reality offered by Searle (1995 and 2010) and Descombes (2014). Anthony Giddens uses the term in roughly the sense in which I use it (Giddens 1984: xx),
social theory that we should continue to take seriously have been, or can be, formulated without explicit reference to pathology. Among them are alienation, ideology, reification, colonization of the life-world (Habermas 1987: 232; Hedrick 2018: ch. 5), and the tendency of capitalism to generate recurring crises. And yet even when the language of pathology is absent, most of these critiques have been formulated within the framework of a conception of social reality that places the idea of life at its core. It is noteworthy that almost every thinker who can be read as a theorist of social pathology — including Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Durkheim, Dewey, and Habermas — understands social reality as social life, where the term “life” is just as important as “social.” That social reality is social life is the main ontological claim I investigate here.

No doubt this book has many defects, but one is especially worthy of mention upfront: the accounts of social pathology reconstructed here take the nation-state as the basic unit of social analysis despite the increasingly globalized nature of social life nearly everywhere. Globalization does not mean that the nation-state has become irrelevant to social theory and critique — numerous decisions of import are still made at that level — but it does mean that many determinants of social life within nation-states are inseparable from processes and developments that extend far beyond their national borders. To varying degrees, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim are aware of the increasingly international character of modern life, but their diagnoses of social pathology, and my reconstructions of them, do not for the most part reflect this awareness. (Such awareness does appear, among other places, in Hegel’s allusions to the “necessity” — internal to civil society — of colonial expansion [PhR: §248], and Marx, more than any thinker covered here, provides resources for considering how, under capitalism, international social life might exhibit pathologies not visible from a merely national perspective.) Contemporary critical theorists urgently need to think further about whether — and if so, how — classical accounts of social pathology can be expanded to take account of global interdependence. At the very least, there are surely distinct pathologies that afflict formerly colonized societies that do not show up if one focuses only on states in Western Europe and North America. Even more important, the social dynamics between the global North and South, or between former colonizers and colonized, can be expected to exhibit patterns of “functioning” not visible from a merely national perspective. The question is: Is the category of pathology useful for understanding these dynamics? Is dysfunction a relevant concept, given that the “healthy” functioning of former colonizing nations relies on ethically objectionable relations to their counterparts? Or are the interactions
between these two poles (and among the nations that somehow lie between them) so asymmetric and oppressive that thinking of them as composing a single “organism” that might or might not function well obscures rather than illuminates our contemporary condition? (Is there, even in biology, an example of an organism whose functioning depends so thoroughly on “higher” organs living at the expense of the “lower”?) These are important questions that I have not addressed here.

Although the chapters of this book are devoted mostly to specific thinkers, its structure is unusual and calls for explanation. Most obviously, I do not discuss the figures I treat in chronological order. Instead, chapters are arranged conceptually, beginning with less complex conceptions of social pathology and social ontology and proceeding to increasingly richer accounts of what human societies are and of the illnesses to which they are susceptible. As readers will quickly discover, this scheme yields only a loose form of organization. For the most part, I do not offer a developmental argument that proceeds by revealing defects in the theories covered in earlier chapters and showing them to be remedied by the theories that come after them. I in no way want to suggest that the specific pathologies discussed in earlier chapters are less deserving of our attention than those examined later. Still, the general account of society and social pathology found in the final three chapters is more sophisticated and theoretically adequate than those treated earlier. In this sense, then, Hegel is the hero of this book, although I do not take this to mean that Hegelians have nothing to learn from Marx, for example, the first figure discussed in detail. Perhaps I am trying to say that much of what we can learn from Marx can be integrated into Hegel’s framework, whereas important possibilities for pathology rendered visible by Hegel would go undetected if we restricted ourselves to Marx’s understanding of (capitalist) society. It follows that my approach here, like that of my past work, is more syncretic and conciliatory than many readers find appropriate. I will not defend this approach beyond saying that, as with most ways of doing things, it has its advantages and disadvantages. I hope that some of those advantages come across to readers of this book despite its less than perfect structure.

The initial two chapters of this book are introductory. The first explores the concept of social pathology in general, distinguishing five interpretations of that idea from the conception of social illness I adopt here. It also discusses various advantages and disadvantages of the concept of social pathology, especially the circumstance that diagnosing a society as ill allows one to thematize defects in social life that the
narrower category of injustice cannot capture. Chapter 2 investigates the ways in which theories of social pathology do and do not rely on a picture of human societies as akin to biological organisms and argues for a limited version of that analogy.

In Chapters 3 and 4, after a brief survey of conceptions of social pathology that can be found in Marx, I focus on those bound up with his account in *Capital* of the formula for the circulation of capital, which distinguishes money that is capital from money that is merely money (and, so, provides a definition of capitalism) in terms of the function money plays in each case. Marx’s biological language makes it plausible to interpret the dysfunctions of capitalism he points to here as social pathologies. One of his contributions to theories of social pathology is to bring to light an ambiguity in the concepts “functional” and “dysfunctional”: the same phenomenon that appears functional from the perspective of what capital requires to function can appear dysfunctional from a broader perspective that takes into account the good of capitalism’s participants. Exploring this point requires us to introduce the idea of a distinctively spiritual aspect of human existence, an idea that will accompany us throughout this book. Indeed, the chapters’ main thesis is that Marx regards social life as spiritual in the same sense I attribute later to Hegel’s social theory, namely, as informed by the aspiration of social members to unite in their social activity the ends of life with those of freedom. Related to this is the claim that capitalism’s failure to allow for the unity of life and freedom constitutes its principal defect for Marx and the core of the most important conception of social pathology I ascribe to him. Finally, I argue that Marx’s conception of human society leaves out certain elements of the spiritual aspect of social life that theories explored in later chapters enable us to incorporate into a more adequate social ontology.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Plato and Rousseau in order to explore the ontological thesis that thinking of societies as functionally organized systems that are artificial, or humanmade, is crucial to understanding how theories of social pathology can ascribe nonarbitrary standards of healthy functioning to social institutions. The first of these points is set out in Plato’s *Republic*, and it is appropriated by many later social philosophers, including Hegel, Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim. Rousseau is the first modern philosopher to elaborate the second point in a form that is promising for contemporary social thought. The most important sense in which social institutions are made by us is expressed in Rousseau’s claim that institutions are grounded in conventions. The upshot of this claim is that a kind of self-consciousness, or subjectivity, is intrinsic to social life, namely, a collective acceptance of the authority of the rules governing social institutions,
which, in the most fundamental of these, includes a shared conception of the good that explains their “point,” part of which consists in (some version of) the freedom of social members. Because acting in accordance with such a conception is constitutive of the activity in which institutional life consists, the functions of institutions – including a conception of their healthy functioning – are accessible, if imperfectly, to the agents on whose activity those functions depend.

Chapter 7 briefly treats two social philosophers who directly influenced Durkheim: Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. Although Durkheim’s position is more sophisticated and compelling than his predecessors’, examining their theories serves to introduce several themes that play a key role in his social philosophy. Looking at his predecessors’ use of the society–organism analogy, their versions of functional explanation and functional analysis, and their conceptions of what a scientific sociology must be like will help us to understand not only the content of Durkheim’s positions but also some of the arguments – formulated in conversation with Comte and Spencer – behind his claims. This chapter distinguishes three types of functional explanation employed by Comte that shape the discussion of Durkheim’s method in the following chapter, especially with regard to what I call functional analysis. Perhaps most important, the chapter argues that Comte and Spencer rely too heavily on the society–organism analogy, leading to an overly biologistic understanding of the types of normative critique available to social pathologists.

Chapter 8, the first of three devoted to Durkheim, examines his version of functionalism in social theory. I reconstruct his position with an eye to defending it as far as possible and to determining which aspects of it are worth retaining for a contemporary understanding of social pathology, including, most fundamentally, the functionally organized character of human societies. Focusing on his claims regarding the moral function of the division of labor, I examine the tortuous epistemological issues bound up with his ascriptions of functions to specific features of society, including the relation between functional explanation and functional analysis. I argue that the method underlying his functional analysis is best understood as a complex form of holism whose claims depend less on single facts and individual arguments than on the plausibility of the whole picture of society that emerges from a variety of mutually reinforcing arguments, empirical facts, interpretive suggestions, and analogies. In this respect Durkheim’s method for ascribing functions to social phenomena bears similarities to other interpretive enterprises, from the reading of texts to (even) the construction of theories in the natural sciences.
Chapter 9 continues my discussion of Durkheim by explaining his understanding of moral facts and the conception of social solidarity at the core of his account of the division of labor’s function in organized societies. These views expand on Rousseau’s understanding of human society as normatively constituted – governed by rules accepted as authoritative by social members – and also introduces the idea, of central importance to my account, that healthy social institutions serve moral and not merely “useful” social functions. On the basis of these discussions I lay out the resources Durkheim has for conceiving of social pathology and examine in detail the modern pathology most important to him, anomie. Finally, I reconstruct his understanding of what is bad about social pathology – why social members should care about whether their society is ill.

Chapter 10 reconstructs Durkheim’s conception of sociology as a science of morality, which bears similarities to Marx’s historical materialist account of morality but in addition claims to legitimize the moral systems whose existence it explains. I distinguish three tasks of Durkheim’s science of morality and conclude that Durkheim does not adequately explain how historically specific moral systems can claim a moral authority that does not reduce to the narrowly functional value they have for social reproduction. Finally, looking ahead, I suggest that Hegel’s conception of spirit offers more promising resources for doing precisely this by understanding morality and social reproduction as inextricable aspects of social life, neither of which can be reduced to the other, and by conceiving of the moral ideals of later societies as rational responses to crises, both functional and moral, encountered by earlier societies, where the idea of a rational response to such a crisis plays a key role in justifying the later moral ideals under question.

Chapter 11 begins my discussion of Hegel’s social philosophy with an extended examination of objective spirit. This concept is central to Hegel’s social ontology because it specifies the kind of being, or reality, characteristic of the social world and distinguishes it from other domains of reality, such as nature and subjective spirit (or mind). I first explain what objective spirit means for the most compelling exponent of such a view of social reality today, Vincent Descombes – borrowing as well, but to a lesser extent, from Durkheim and John Searle. I end with an overview of some respects in which Hegel’s view goes beyond Descombes’s. This chapter distinguishes four claims espoused in some version by all of the major positions I consider in this book: (i) There is a form of mindedness that exists outside the consciousness of individual social members; (ii) the externally existing mind, embodied in social institutions, is in some sense prior to the
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individuals whose lives are ruled by them; (iii) social reality depends on a collective acceptance of its institutions’ normative rules; and (iv) such rules constrain what social members do but also expand their practical possibilities and hence enrich their agency.

Chapter 12 continues the discussion of Hegel by examining his characterization of human society as the “living good.” As the term “living” suggests, this aspect of his position can be read as his distinctive take on the familiar analogy between human societies and living organisms. For him that analogy implies that human societies both incorporate the processes of life (in carrying out the activities necessary for material reproduction) and mirror them in the sense that social and biological life exhibit a similar structure. The latter claim appeals not only to the functional specialization of human societies emphasized by Plato and Durkheim but also to the idiosyncratic Hegelian thesis that the processes of biological and social life are like those of “subjects,” the principal characteristic of which is to maintain itself by positing “contradictions” internal to itself and then negotiating them in a way that establishes its own identity without completely abolishing the internal differences it has posited. (What this means will become clearer in the chapter itself.) If Hegel emphasizes the continuity between life and social being, he also insists on the differences between mere animal organisms and spiritual beings (including human societies): most importantly, the presence of self-consciousness and the capacity for freedom. The realm of (objective) spirit, then, consists in cooperative processes of life that are imbued with ethical significance deriving from their potential to be consciously self-determined, a potential that the life processes of mere animal organisms lack; thus, spiritual activities are life processes that simultaneously aim at realizing the freedom of those who carry them out. At the end of this chapter these ideas are fleshed out by examining how Hegel’s famous master–slave dialectic brings to light the fundamental elements and structure of any set of human relations that count as a society.

Chapter 13 examines Hegel’s understanding of both animal and mental illness and, making use of the concepts of objective spirit and the living good, extrapolates an account of various conceptions of social pathology that his social philosophy licenses. It argues that for Hegel social pathologies should be understood not only in terms of impaired functioning generally or as imbalances among specialized functional spheres, but also as ways in which society fails in the spiritual task of enabling its members to relate to life in the mode of freedom. Specific forms of such pathologies include (but are not exhausted by) social practices losing their spiritual features and
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becoming indistinguishable from processes of mere life; social impediments to the realization of practical selfhood, such as inadequate sources of recognition or the generation of infinite, unsatisfiable desires; forms of ideology involving a mismatch between what social members do and what they take themselves to be doing in their social practices; the failure of social life to bring together the ends of life and those of freedom, including cases where social participation becomes merely a means for staying alive rather than a site of freedom; and socially caused impairments of individuals’ ability to reconcile themselves to the fact of death. The final paragraphs of this chapter point to the form of immanent critique found in Hegel’s account of bondsman and lord as a promising solution to one problem encountered by Durkheim’s science of morality, namely, its inability to provide an ethical justification of social norms that avoids reducing the point of morality to its mere functionality for social reproduction.

I am indebted to many individuals and institutions who have aided me in the writing of this book. I am sure that I have failed to mention some of them here, and to them I apologize. Most recently, I had the good fortune to receive extensive anonymous comments from two attentive and insightful readers of the manuscript whose help was enlisted by Cambridge University Press. I have also benefited from philosophical conversations with many individuals: Mark Alznauer, Barbara Carnevali, Maeve Cooke, Mattia Gallotti, Amanda Greene, Axel Honneth, Rahel Jaeggi, Jan Kandiyali, Bruno Karsenti, Philip Kitcher, Richard Moran, Karen Ng, Andreja Novakovic, Lea-Riccarda Prix, Eva von Redecker, Isette Schumacher, Achille Varzi – and undoubtedly many others.

Two institutions provided the generous support of research stays that greatly enhanced my ability to make progress on this project: the Center for Humanities and Social Change, Humboldt University (Berlin) and School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS-Paris). In addition, many academic audiences patiently endured lectures in which, in early phases of the project, I tried to work out ideas not yet fully formed, including at Boston University, City University of New York, Colgate University, Columbia University, DePaul University, School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS-Paris), Georg August University (Göttingen), Georgetown University, Goethe University (Frankfurt), Harvard University, Humboldt University (Berlin), Indiana University, Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt), International Hegel Conference (Göttingen), International Hegel Congress (Stuttgart), Kansas State University, New School for Social Research, New York University Law
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School, North Carolina State University, Oxford University, Princeton University, School of Higher Economics (Moscow), Stockholm University, Technical University (Darmstadt), Metropolitan Autonomous University (Mexico City), Catholic University (Lima), University Ca’ Foscari (Venice), University of Lucerne, University of Lausanne, University of Leiden, University of California–Riverside, University of Cambridge, University of Essex, University of Georgia, University of Helsinki, University of Pittsburgh, University of Sydney, University of Toronto, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and York University.

Hilary Gaskin, as always, provided invaluable advice throughout the writing and editing process. Finally, Eugene O’Keefe continually pushed me to make my prose more concrete and, more importantly, provided support of a nonacademic sort without which I might never have finished the book.
Note on Citations

Although I refer throughout to English translations of primary texts, *I have revised many quotations, often substantially*, in order to render the original passages more accurately.

I have made use of the following abbreviations in citing the texts I refer to most frequently:

**Vincent Descombes**

*IM* The Institutions of Meaning (1994)

**Émile Durkheim**

*DLS* The Division of Labor in Society (1984)

[II “Individualism and the Intellectuals” (1969)]

[ME Moral Education (1961)]

[RSM Rules of Sociological Method (1982)]

[S Suicide: A Study in Sociology (1997)]

[SP Sociology and Philosophy (2014)]

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel**

*EL* Encyclopedia Logic (1991)

[cited by section number, where A refers to the Addition to the cited section]
Note on Citations

*PhG*  *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2018)
[cited by paragraph number (e.g., *PhG*: ¶182)]

*PhM*  *Philosophy of Mind: Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1971)
[cited by section number, where A refers to the Addition to the cited section]

[cited by section number, where A refers to the Addition to the cited section]

*PhR*  *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1991)
[cited by section number (e.g., *PhR*: §270A), where A refers to the Addition to the cited section]

*VPR*  *Die Philosophie des Rechts: Die Mitschriften Wannenmann* (1983)

**Immanuel Kant**

*CJ*  *Critique of Judgment* (1987)

**Karl Marx**


*MER*  *The Marx-Engels Reader* (1978)

*MEGA*  *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe* (1975)
[cited by volume and page number (e.g., *MEGA*: XXIII.529)]

**Friedrich Nietzsche**

*GM*  *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1989)
[cited by essay and section number (e.g., *GM*: III.13)]

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

*DI*  *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1997a)
[cited by English page numbers followed by French]

*OC*  *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 3 (1964)
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Note on Citations

PE  Discourse on Political Economy (1997b)
[cited by English page numbers followed by French]

SC  The Social Contract (1997c)
[cited by book, chapter, and paragraph numbers (e.g., I.3.ii)]

John Searle


MSW  Making the Social World (2010)