This book focuses on the connections between two contemporary, intensively debated fields of inquiry: Hegel-inspired theories of recognition (Anerkennung)\(^1\) and analytical social ontology\(^2\). The aim of the collection is to make philosophical progress by bringing together the substantially overlapping but in practice so far mostly isolated debates in these fields. If recognition has social ontological significance, as it seems to have, how does taking this seriously fit with the analyses put forward in contemporary social ontology (or, as it is sometimes called by some of the main proponents, “philosophical social theory”, “philosophy of society”, or “philosophy of sociality”)? Are there ways in which theories of recognition and the current understandings in analytical social ontology could enrich one another? How do leading theorists in these fields, as well as younger scholars familiar with both fields, see the connections?
This collection draws attention to issues that are arguably best elaborated by drawing on both sources, without letting the unfruitful division of the philosophical discipline into the ‘analytical’ and ‘continental’ streams get in the way. Several of its contributors have been previously engaged in important and influential work at the crossroads of these streams of contemporary thought, and have significantly contributed to their cross-fertilization.

In this introductory chapter, we will first briefly characterize the topic of social ontology and ask whether social ontology, as it is widely practiced in contemporary analytical philosophy, could have something useful to learn from recognition-theories. Secondly, we will characterize the topic of theories of recognition and again ask whether philosophy of recognition, as it has been discussed recently, might have something to learn from the analytical tradition of social ontology. Thirdly, we will clarify some of the intricacies of the concept of recognition, and, fourthly, provide a chapter by chapter summary of the rest of the book.

1. Social Ontology

In a book preceding most of the recent debates on analytical social ontology in the English speaking philosophical world, Carol Gould points out that the term ‘social ontology’ can be understood in two ways that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the one hand, it may mean the study of the nature of social reality, of individuals, institutions, processes and so on that societies are composed of. Roughly, social ontology thus concerns those aspects of reality that social sciences study, as opposed to natural sciences. Its main task, understood in this way, is to determine the basic entities of social life, their interaction and change. On the other hand, ‘social ontology’ may mean “ontology socialized”, which is the study of “the social roots of conceptions of […] reality”. In this sense, all ontology (of nature as well as of society) may be social. Think of for instance the sense in which the ontology of planets is social, because the criteria of “planets” are socially and historically construed by relevant experts.

In Gould’s view, the two senses of ‘social ontology’—the first having to do with the constitution of the social world and the second with conceptions of the world and their social roots—are related to the extent that conceptions whereby social reality is understood are not merely descriptive of social