The primary focus of my dissertation is to defend the notion of recognition, found in the work of such thinkers as G.W.F. Hegel and Axel Honneth, as a primary concept in contemporary political discourse by emphasizing its ontological foundations. At its most basic, the notion of recognition states that the way one understands her or him-self to be a conscious subject and a full political agent is only through being acknowledged as such by another. Likewise, one must simultaneously reciprocate this acknowledgement in order for both to be elevated to the position of full subject.

The general problem is that the concept of recognition has come under heavy attack from several different theoretical angles. These criticisms state that the recognitive project reifies the notion of identity in much too strong a way; that recognition alone cannot account for power differences because it focuses so heavily on identity; and that recognitive theory believes that all experiences and ways of being in the world can be recognized and therefore understood in some way, which is simply not the case. These criticisms are primarily directed at Honneth’s idea of recognition.

I argue that if we follow Honneth with no modification, the criticisms that have been articulated above become substantial threats to the project as a whole. I believe that this is the case due to his heavily empirical leanings. It is for this reason that I shift the focus away from Honneth’s empirical leanings, which are indispensable but represent only a single side of the coin, in order to ground recognition in a Hegelian-inspired ontology. Ontology is the study of the basic structures that constitute reality, which in this case means structures that must be in place in order to have conscious human beings. I thus show that recognition is that which makes it possible to have a notion of subjectivity as such – we can only have human subjects in and through the process of mutual recognition. Understanding recognition in this manner allows us to avoid the above-mentioned criticisms.