Benjamin’s “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” contains several ideas that are important for understanding both Adorno and Agamben texts, and that have real value for the study of utopian discourse.

The initial epigraph (from Goethe’s Materialien zur Geschichte der Farbenlehre) asserts the absence of wholeness both in knowledge and in reflection, links science with art, and asserts “since art is always wholly represented in every individual work of art, so science ought to reveal itself completely in every individual object treated.” What it means for art to be “wholly represented” in any individual work of art might be disputed. But this signals Benjamin’s Hegelian idea of the universal in the particular.

Benjamin importantly links philosophy to representation throughout this introduction. His first sentence “It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation.” (27) sets the tone for what follows. He contrasts the truth available to mathematics with the “area of truth towards which language is directed.” (27) Philosophy as a representational discipline, the purpose of which is the representation of truth, demands attention to form, such as the form of the treatise or the essay. A philosophical system anticipates, rather than embodies and represents, the truth to which he alludes. In discussing the “treatise,” he links it to the middle ages, identifies it as an educative and “propaedeutic” form, which “refers, albeit implicitly, to those objects of theology without which truth is inconceivable.” (28) This implicit reference seems to have something to do with the origin of the English word “treatise” and the German word “Abhandlung” in the Latin word for handle, or draw as in draw out. The form of authority in a treatise “is the authoritative quotation. Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression. Representation as digression - such is the methodological nature of the treatise.” (28) This statement provides some insight into Agamben’s textual form in particular, which emphatically adopts this form, but also into Adorno’s, which displays the “continual pausing for breath” which “is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation” (28) that Benjamin also associates with the treatise. He compares the treatise to a mosaic, in which the fragments of glass and also the quality of the “glass paste” contribute to the overall representation, in the same way that fragments of thought, even those remote from the “underlying” idea, have great value as part of the “minute precision” of the entire work.

The specific practice of representation in philosophical prose is the representation of truth through the representation of ideas. “Ideas are the object of this investigation [of whatever, by philosophy]. If representation is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the representation of ideas.” (29) “Ideas” for Benjamin are not objects of knowledge. “Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession.” (29) Benjamin’s analysis of the relationship of possession to knowledge and to truth, and the necessity of having an object of possession as the complement to knowledge, which is
incompatible with truth, for which method is "self-representation," echoes Agamben's analysis of the object of eros as image in Stanzas. He arrives at the conclusion that truth and ideas are essences, both of which acquire a supreme metaphysical significance, as in Plato.

The resonance continues in Benjamin's discussion of the relationship of truth and beauty. The Symposium "presents truth - the realm of ideas - as the essential content of beauty." [30] These are Benjamin's version of Platonic ideas, now, not just ideas that float through our heads like concepts or random images. "It declares the truth to be beautiful." [30] Considering that Benjamin insists that an understanding of this view is indispensable for the philosophy of art, it would be unwise to ignore it in reading Adorno's Aesthetic Theory. Truth is beautiful, really, for its seeker (Eros, desire); "This representational impulse in truth is the refuge of beauty as such. . . ." [31] and then he tells a story of pursuit, flight, refuge, and the relationship between love of truth and beauty which ends with the lover being the only one who "can bear witness to the fact that truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it." [31]

He elaborates the difference between truth and "the object of knowledge" at some length. This is illustrated first in the continuing validity of philosophical works that lack authority with respect to objects of knowledge, but succeed in representing the world of ideas; in comparing the philosopher to the scientist on one hand (in a common interest "in the elimination of the merely empirical" [32]) and the artist on the other (both are involved in representation); then in the lack of relationship between completeness in a philosophical system and truth. In contrast to the Platonic maxim of "saving the phenomena," Benjamin advances the notion of a different kind of salvation of phenomena by means of ideas, involving their conceptual division and resolution of "objects into their constituent elements." [33] I don't even pretend to know what this means. Concepts mediate phenomena and ideas, enabling "phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas." [34] Concepts also assist in the representation of ideas. Empirical phenomena, in their turn, represent ideas: "For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements." [34] In a sense, then, empirical reality appears here as the methodology (see p. 28) of truth, or of ideas. We seem to be on the same ground here as we are with the concept of "general revelation."

Ideas [which it is the task of the philosophical treatise to represent, in its purpose of representing truth] are the "objective, virtual arrangement, their objective interpretation" of phenomena. [34] "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars." [34] In saying that "the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena - or rather their elements - determines their relationship to each other" [34] Benjamin suggests an understanding of ideas as the underlying essences that govern the meaning of the world of phenomena. Ideas once apprehended might, thus, prompt revisions of the conceptual organization of phenomena in a given system or ideology. "The idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart." [35] So, an idea will enable us to recognize the relationship of some extreme
manifestation or other to a more typical or modal manifestation of the same underlying dynamic or — since Benjamin is using this term — essence. As an illustration, he uses the image of a mother surrounded by her children, seen to “live in the fullness of her power”, “so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them.” (35) These extremes are empirical phenomena. “It is the function of concepts to groups [sic] phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas.” (35)

Since ideas aren’t given in the way empirical phenomena are, are they given to “intellectual vision”? Here he explicitly departs from “neo-Platonic paganism” because “the being of ideas simply cannot be conceived of as the object of vision” since “vision does not enter into the form of existence which is peculiar to truth, which is devoid of all intention” and “does not [truth, this is] enter into relationships”. (35) Knowledge, concepts, are intentional, and therefore are not true. “Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas.” (36) Rather than approaching it as something which can become the object of knowledge, it has to be approached as something requiring “total immersion and absorption in it” (36) — perhaps akin to absorption in the mystical sense. What makes this formulation possibly not quite completely spiritual/anti-physical, and therefore something with which we might feel required to take issue, is his subsequent assertion that “The structure of truth, then, demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple existence of things, but which is superior in its permanence. Truth is not an intent which relaizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name.” (36) Or, we might be entitled to think, The Name, Ha-Shem.

Now, we come to the notion of “words” as the origin of Plato’s ideas, words as “deified” and at the same time shorn of or lacking cognitive meaning. “The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of any word.” (36) Words that we use to speak with also have an “obvious, profane meaning”, and “the task of the philosopher” is “to restore, by representation, the primary of the symbolic character of the word” (36) which has to do with the idea’s self-consciousness, not much to do with communication. This itself has something to do with revelation, but philosophy can’t take that tone, so has to work at “recalling in memory the primordial form of perception” associated with this symbolic element of words, the existence of the word as name. (36) “... in philosophical contemplation, the idea is released from the heart of reality as the word, reclaiming its name-giving rights.” (37)

Adam, in Paradise, naming, is more than Plato “the father of the human race and the father of philosophy.” (37) Paradise is that location in which “there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words. Ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming, and they have to be renewed in philosophical contemplation.” (37)
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What this seems to mean for Agamben is that the Idea is "the thing itself" (see "The Idea of Appearance" in Idea of Prose, 121-3, which is in part a commentary on this section of the Trauerspiel, taking up the themes of the "hypothesis" and the issue of saving the phenomena, tracking this expression of Plato's to its own source, locating the function of the hypothesis in Plato's presentation, and also dealing with the relationship of beauty to phenomena and ideas. The idea is "not some sensible thing presupposed by language and knowledge, but rather exposed in them, absolutely. Appearance which is no longer based on an hypothesis, but on itself, the thing no longer separated from its intelligibility, but in the midst of it, is the idea, is the thing itself." (123)). So, when Benjamin says "in this renewal the primordial mode of apprehending words is restored." (37) he is making an assertion about the relationship of philosophy to the real and experiential intelligibility of the world, which is presented here as a paradisaic experience and intelligibility. Then he goes on to point out the political dimension of this sought-after intelligibility, in saying "And so, in the course of its history, which has so often been an object of scorn, philosophy is - and rightly so - a struggle for the representation of a limited number of words which always remain the same - a struggle for the representation of ideas." (37)

Then Benjamin goes on to say that ideas, essences, exist in "complete and immaculate independence" from one another, like suns, revolving harmoniously around one another without contact. How does this image function as an image of absence of relationship? How is a determinate arrangement in space, simultaneous activity in space, maintenance of 'empty' space between suns, preservation of harmony - all of this not an image of relationship? To someone who understands relationship ever in something like a statistical sense, as covariance or correlation, an image that incorporates coordination or harmony can't represent the absence of relationship. Here, by whatever word is translated as "relationship," Benjamin seems to mean something more like interconnection, something more like physical contact or blending, mixing, recombination - which is maybe the province of the realm of empirical phenomena.

Then, from the assertion that "the Trauerspiel is an idea," (38) Benjamin goes on to introduce the further examination of this particular form, its relationship to other aesthetic or literary categories, and to discuss the difference between what he is doing and either a deductive or an inductive examination of the subject from the standpoint purely of amassing factual details about the genre. So that the aim of the subsequent study is to represent the idea of the Trauerspiel, a literary critical study undertaken or presented with the representational attitude of philosophy, as an undertaking in the philosophy of art.