Life is not as easy now as it once was for anyone who sets about writing on Plato, and who has the least sensitive skin, or the slightest ear for current debates. Once upon a time, the task seemed simple enough: either to discover in the texts some historically determined set of ideas or doctrines, or else to construct the sorts of more sophisticated ideas after which Plato could plausibly be seen to have been reaching. Both types of approach live on, in different varieties and combinations; but both presuppose that the dialogues have determinate meanings, which - given sufficient application - we have the resources to reveal. But now the sceptics have arrived in force, and are busy undermining such old certainties. We are told that to suppose that any text, or indeed any utterance (not just Platonic or ancient ones), has or had any single meaning or set of meanings, or any that we are able to identify, is simply a delusion. We necessarily read and hear from different perspectives, none of which is uniquely privileged or 'correct'; the lines of communication are already down even before a person starts writing or speaking. There are salutary lessons here for the Platonic interpreter: in particular, he or she ought to be disturbed by the sheer number of different ways of reading Plato that have been proposed, with equal confidence, in the two thousand years since he wrote. It is easy enough to write off the neo-Platonists, for example, for example, on the grounds that they have their own axes to grind; but who is to say that their axes are any less Platonic than any others? To that one may reply that there are, after all, rules of evidence, and that the texts themselves impose certain broader, or narrower, limits of interpretation on the interpreter. Yet in the end every reader of the dialogues will be likely to bring certain presuppositions to their reading
of them which are formed by factors external to the text, even if these may be modified by what they find - or think they find - in the text.

To say that, however, is not to say that anything goes, or that it is everyone for himself or herself. What matters is that in adopting a particular mode of interpretation readers admit that is what they are doing, and have reasons for doing it which they are prepared seriously to defend. Defending oneself in a dispute over a particular context or sentence ought usually to be relatively easy, given the high degree of connectedness in (most) Platonic texts. (If that proposition is denied, it could be tested in as many cases as necessary.) The point at which things become difficult is when an interpretation depends on or includes taking a view of Plato in general - e.g. of his attitude towards philosophy, or the writing of philosophy. But even here it must be possible to advance reasons why one adopts a given view (or if not, it is not worth advancing); reasons which anyone who takes a different view must take into account. Those who take an extreme sceptical standpoint may refuse to play the game, and content themselves with repeating the standard objections against 'essentialism', or against the privileged position being given to a certain model of 'rationality'. But unless they can show why the particular reason given for believing x is not a good reason, in this particular case, there is no reason to listen to them.

Michael L. Morgan deliberately adopts a historical approach to Plato, while - as his Introduction shows - being fully aware of the sceptics at his heels. He finds his defence in numbers:

'In one sense, this book might be viewed as an attempt to revive an older reading of Plato, a mode of reading associated with such outstanding classicists as Burnet, Taylor, Cornford, Hackforth, Bluck, and Guthrie. In another sense, however, the present study could be conceived as a contribution to a recent movement, an attempt to treat Plato as others have treated Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Hegel, and Bentham, among many great figures in the history of philosophy. Quentin Skinner's studies of Hobbes, J.G.A. Pocock's book on Machiavelli, John Dunn's and Richard Ashcraft's treatments of Locke - all these and more come to mind. There is a contemporary "movement"