As I have stated in a previous article on the epistolary form of Sen. Ep. 102 1), Seneca, though again and again expressing a strong dislike for dialectics, nevertheless often treats dialectical questions in his letters, even to the point of introducing imaginary requests by Lucilius as an excuse for doing so. In the case of Ep. 102, which deals with a philosophical thesis, he wilfully suppresses the purely ethical arguments and gives, though ‘reluctantly’, the dialectical proofs only. This attitude seems to be contradictory and invites the student to go further into the subject.

In Ep. 45, Seneca blames the great philosophers, whose works he is reading and using for his own writings, for having indulged too much in dialectical disputations, instead of devoting the whole of their precious time to the solution of real problems 2). In order to substantiate this reproach, he gives, in Epp. 48 and 49, some of the most striking examples of futile dialectical problems 3).

In Ep. 82 Seneca again discusses a dialectical quaestio (death is not a malum) 4), and concludes: ego non redigo ista ad legem dialecticam ... totum genus istuc exturbandum puto (§ 19). After the dialectical treatment of the quaestio, with the help of syllogisms, he gives a sample of a more suitable treatment, in his own taste:

2) Ep. 45, 3-5: multum magnorum virorum iudicio credo, aliquid et meo vindico ... multum illis temporis verborum cavillatio abripuit, captiosae disputaciones....
3) Ep. 48: mus syllaba est etc.; Ep. 49: quod non perdististi, habes, etc. Seneca comments: o pueriles ineptias ... philosophia mihi promittit ut parem deo faciat. quae dementia est supervacua discere in tanta temporis egestate! non vaco ad istas ineptias.
4) Ep. 82, 9: nullum malum gloriosum est; mors autem gloria est (can be a glorious thing): mors ergo non est malum.
do tibi Fabios ... Laconas tibi ostendo in ipsis Thermopylarum angustiis positos ... Leonidas ... etc. (§§. 20-24). We may wonder why he nevertheless had devoted a considerably long passage to the dialectical disputation (§§ 9 sqq.); to account for this, Seneca himself gives the following explanation: ... ineptias Graecas ... nondum, quamvis mirer, excussi (§ 8); much to his own astonishment, he is unable to free himself altogether from dialectics. What is in the background of this curious odi et amo?

In a letter written on the next day (Ep. 83), Seneca returns to the same point again: superest ex hesterno mihi cogitatio, quid sibi voluerint prudentissimi viri, qui rerum maxima probationes levissimas et perplexas fecerunt ... ? Still, here again, he records a debate on a sophism by Zeno on drunkenness 1) (§§ 9-17); after this, he adds a tirade on drunkenness, on his own account and in the manner of a Cynic diatribe and of his teacher Attalus (§§ 18-27).

The function of the numerous sophisms in Epp. 85 and 87 is a completely different one. As it is put in Ep. 85, 1: until now Seneca had only given some samples (quasi gustum) from the proofs (quae a nostris dicuntur ut probetur ...) of the Stoic thesis that virtue in itself suffices to ensure perfect happiness; now, however, he will, on Lucilius' request (iubes me ...), deal with a number of the sophisms (interrogationes) concerning this thesis; he cannot give the whole set (quidquid est interrogationum ...), for that would fill a book, not a letter. Seneca himself is not at all pleased with this type of argument (illud totiens testor me hoc argumentorum genere non delectari).

The wording of this passage makes it clear that Seneca records the dialectical discussions as he found them in his source(s). Though, here and there, he adds his own comments and criticism, the sophisms are given essentially for their own sake, and not, as before, because he wants to ridicule them or because he is astonished to find them in the works of the great philosophers. The alleged direct reason for giving them here is not to give an example of a wrong approach to an ethical problem, or to satisfy his own 'morbid' curiosity in dialectics, but the fulfilling of a 'request' of Lucilius. Now, if it is true

1) Ep. 83, 9: ebrio secretum sermonem nemo committit; viro autem bona committit: ergo vir bonus ebrius non est.