

Getting Students to Think (Comparatively): Teaching the Introductory Course in the 1990s

David Wilsford, *Institute for American Universities*

The essential problem facing teachers of introductory comparative politics is engaging students' intellects. This is so for three reasons.

First, students experience most education passively rather than actively. This is particularly true of the social sciences as compared to the natural sciences, which use hands-on laboratory tasks as a common supplement to lectures.

Second, American students exhibit high levels of parochialism, especially in contrast to students from other advanced, industrial democracies. There is not much natural inclination to seek knowledge of the outside world, which is after all the basis of comparative politics.

Third, the introductory character of the course means that many of the students possess no particular commitment to political science. These students are there to "ticket-punch"; the quicker and less painful it is, so much the better.

Organizing the Course: Specifying the Dependent Variable and Selecting Cases

I adopt an explicit problem-solving orientation to focus the course and to motivate students' will to learn. In science, the roots of problem-solving are found in dependent variables. So, I organize the course around a single dependent variable that focuses our treatment of each country in rigorous systematic ways.

The choice of dependent variable is of utmost significance, for everything else in the course flows from it. Further, the more important the dependent variable, the greater the chance that students will develop some commitment to the comparative investigation of political systems. In political science, what could be a more important dependent variable than the difference in

world-wide political system types, especially in an era of radical transformation in politics the world over?

In other words, what could be more important for political science than the differences between the rule of the one versus the few versus the many and to what ends that rule is exercised (Aristotle)? Or the difference between the rule of laws versus that of the tyrant (Montesquieu)? Or that between liberal and despotic democracies (Tocqueville)? Or between democracy and dictatorship (Barrington Moore)?

These all constitute different cuts at the same dependent variable, that is, how political authority is organized, distributed and exercised in a given country. In this course, the dependent variable is specified according to two dimensions that are coupled together. These are, on the one hand, the strength and autonomy of state structures, and, on the other hand, the strength and autonomy of society vis-à-vis the state. This dual dimension assumes that one can heuristically conceive of all politics as revolving around almost infinite demands by societal actors upon the decision-making institutions and actors of the state.

Here, I remind students of both the Lasswell and Easton definitions of politics: Lasswell spoke of politics as all about "who gets what, when, how and why." Less colloquially, Easton defined politics as "the authoritative allocation of resources and values." Both definitions imply that, in the face of infinite demands pressing in on them from society, state authorities make binding decisions about the distribution of finite resources and the sanction of opposing values. The interactions between states and societies are therefore characterized by tension. In many tangible ways, the patterns of politics that prevail in a given polity determine who

gets what and who does not, where resources are allocated and where they are not, and whose values win the day and whose do not. I label this dependent variable the "mode of political authority."

Depicted graphically as a left-right continuum, the dependent variable ranges from weak state/strong society on the left-hand side to strong state/weak society on the right-hand side. Conceptually, countries that fall further to the left-hand side are characterized by societies that are more active and that interact with states that are more reactive. By contrast, countries that fall further to the right-hand side of the dependent variable continuum are characterized by societies that are more reactive in the face of states that are more active.

Since all variable dimensions are constituted in fact by an infinite degree of gradation from one end of the putative continuum to the other, I find it heuristically helpful to divide the dependent variable into four categories. These are artificial constructions that provide us with a convenient shorthand as the investigation of cases unfolds. Initially, we divide the dependent variable dichotomously into relatively strong societies joined with relatively weak states on the left-hand side and relatively weak societies joined with relatively strong states on the right-hand side. We then further subdivide each dichotomous category into two subcategories, which enables us to distinguish very usefully between important differences among democracies, as well as important differences among authoritarian regimes.

These four categories, for convenience, are labelled *pluralism*, *neocorporatism*, *state corporatism*, and *monism*. Each label captures some of the essence of how legitimate politics is conceived of as taking

place in each pattern. In pluralism, the state assumes a relatively reactive posture, refereeing the free play of interests that come into conflict on the political playing field. In neo-corporatism, the state is more active, assuming responsibilities, as the head does with the body (politic?), in organizing and orchestrating many of the important interactions of the body—each of whose members has a role to perform for the harmonious functioning of the whole. In state corporatism, the head dominates the body much more aggressively and, rather than relying on carrots to motivate societal actors, uses coercive methods, or sticks, to achieve its ends. But the state does not pretend to obliterate civil society, just forcibly manage it. In monism, the state seeks to encompass and make its own all previously independent and autonomous groups and individuals of society. Conceptually, it works to forcibly absorb all the diverse elements of society, making them part of a unitary state.

As in real science, some cases fit these categories more neatly than others. Moreover, countries examined *longitudinally* often constitute two cases analytically rather than one. So, over time, countries may move from one placement to another within a broad category or across categories of this dependent variable. It is important that students realize that the categories and boundaries between them—as well as the labels chosen to serve as shorthand—are artificial constructions that are useful only insofar as they help to make systematic sense out of an exceedingly complex world. That is, after all, the task of all science.

Once the dependent variable is specified, we turn to case selection.¹ That is, if we assume that investigative resources are finite and that, therefore, one cannot examine each case individually in the universe of cases (this would constitute a census), then the problem becomes: Which subset of cases represents the range of possible variance on the dependent variable. In some scientific fields, the data, especially if easily quantifiable, lends itself to a statistical proce-

dure known as random sampling. The universe of countries in the world, however, is not sufficiently numerous (the classic problem of the too-small large “N”) to permit a statistical random sample. Moreover, for a reason artificial to the scientific process, namely the brief length of an academic term, we are forced to severely limit the cases treated to a very small number. Moreover, because much of the data about politics in each country are qualitative (that is, simply, “hard to quantify,” or measure in intervals), each case must be treated in adequate depth as insurance against loss of empirical rigor.

In the absence of a random sampling technique, great care must be brought to bear on case selection. If all our chosen cases come from a limited range of the dependent variable’s dimension, we will not be able to classify, much less explain, the dependent variable’s variance. That is, if all the laboratory rats have cancer, we will never be able to understand why some rats do not get cancer. Likewise, if our dependent variable has been specified to include all modes of political authority or the universe of ways that societies interact with states, as the course here does (although a course devoted exclusively to advanced, industrial democracies would not), then looking only at extremely authoritarian systems would not help us to understand the variance across polities in the presence or absence of democracy.

In this course, I am open with students about the strengths and weaknesses of our case selection. On the one hand, with some judicious front-loading, the instructor can ensure that the small number of cases chosen will represent the range of universal variance on the dependent variable. Also, we soon see, within the parameters of adequate variance, the instructor also tilts case selection in favor of those countries for which data is available for classification along the independent variables. On the other hand, it does no good to pretend that only four, five, or six cases are going to get us very far in a deep understanding of the differences in conditions underlying democracies

and authoritarian systems. At best, students should be aware that, while the framework is scientifically sound, the severe and artificial constraint of a 10- or 15-week term will not permit more than an initial cut at the problem.

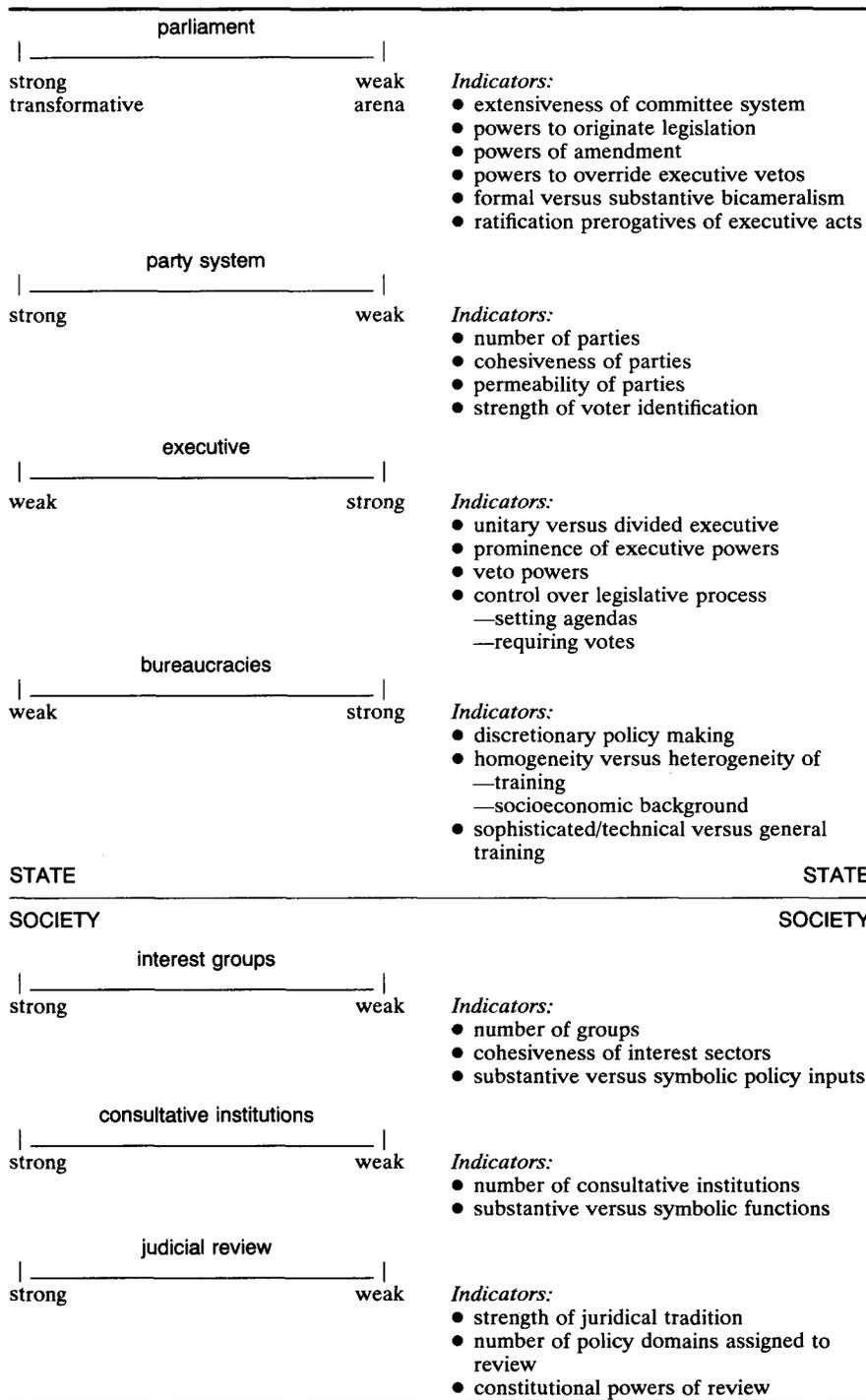
Classifying the Cases

Science, of course, is based upon the search for empirical relationships between variables, and so once the dependent variable has been specified and cases selected, we must turn to the empirical task of describing where cases are placed along the dependent variable. We refer to this part of the exercise as classification. Through classification we establish the range of variance on the dependent variable that in turn constitutes the problem that we wish to solve. Which countries fall along the left-hand side of the continuum versus which countries fall to the right-hand side? Subsequently, because it is science, we seek explanations for *why* countries fall where they do along the dependent variable. That is, we will explore the power of independent variables to explain the variance that we have established for our cases on the dependent variable.

In this course, we classify each country at some position on this continuum with the aid of seven descriptive variables laid out in Figure 1. The first four descriptive variables for each country are the parliament, the party system, the executive, and the bureaucracy. These enable us to roughly assess the strength or weakness of the state for each case. The final three variables, interest groups, consultative institutions, and judicial review, enable us to assess the strength or weakness of society. We place each country on each descriptive variable according to a number of concrete indicators that are listed on the right-hand side of Figure 1.

These are not the only or necessarily the best descriptive variables that one might use in order to assess strength or weakness of state and society. Nonetheless, there is

FIGURE 1
Descriptive Variables



logic behind the variables specified here, and the left or right positioning of “strong” versus “weak” for any one of the variables is important. Stronger parliaments and party systems provide better, more secure avenues for society’s input into the state’s decision-making

processes. On the dependent variable, this corresponds to a display of weaker states and stronger societies on the left-hand side. Stronger executives and bureaucracies are better at structuring, perhaps even shutting out, input from society into the state. Stronger interest

group systems and consultative institutions provide vehicles for more society input. Strong structures of judicial review provide better redress to society for grievances against the state.

It must be stressed that because most of the data available to us is qualitative in character, we can only formulate rough orders-of-magnitude assessments for each country and its position on any of the descriptive variables and on the dependent variable relative to other countries. *These are not interval scales.* Distance between countries therefore has no meaning. This is also true of our classification of countries on the independent variables.

Assessing the Explanatory Power of Independent Variables

Classifying each case on the dependent variable is the “what” part of the scientific enterprise, laying out the variance we wish to understand. As such, specifying the dependent variable and classifying cases constitute only the first two stages of the scientific enterprise. The third stage—sometimes the most compelling—is searching for explanation, “why” we get what we got on the dependent variable.

After classifying a country on the dependent variable, we then turn to assessing two competing independent variables. In the first version of the course, the first independent variable is the historical configuration of social coalitions as the country moves into the modern period. This explanation is based upon Barrington Moore’s classic *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1966). In the second version of the course, the first independent variable is the pattern of political traditions that characterize the country’s pre-modern political system. This explanation is based upon Reinhard Bendix’s great work *Kings or People* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1978).

In both versions of the course, the second independent variable is the timing of the country’s industrialization. This is based upon Alex-

ander Gershonkron's formulation, modified by Raymond Vernon's work on the product cycle. Using this variable, one argues that the earlier a country industrializes the less need there is for strong state structures to organize investment, production, and trade. The later a country industrializes the more the catch-up imperative calls for strong states to manage the industrialization.

I have found a vertical approach to country treatment better suited to teaching than a horizontal approach. That is, students seem better anchored in the empirical detail when each country is fully treated before moving on to subsequent countries. We describe each system using the seven descriptive variables in order to reach some judgment about that system's placement on the dependent variable. Then we turn immediately to see how well the two independent variables explain this outcome on the dependent variable. But intellectually, the so-called horizontal approach is very attractive in its own right.

At the close of the course, we make our overall assessment of the relative adequacy of each independent variable as an explanation of the variance between countries on the dependent variable, and it is here that I introduce the possibility of adopting the rule of parsimony ("that which explains the most with the least") in distinguishing between the relative explanatory power of the two independent variables. Clearly, the timing of industrialization is a priori a parsimonious variable. One does not have to know very much about a country to predict the outcome on the dependent variable. On the other hand, is a parsimonious variable that explains somewhat fewer cases as intellectually satisfying as a more elaborate one that explains more? At the end of the course, I raise these questions, but refrain from answering them—in part because I am not sure that the social sciences have clear answers to them.

Active Techniques to Overcome Passive Learning

I began by claiming that the essential problematic facing all teachers of introductory comparative politics is engaging the students' intellects. This was so, I argued, because of the passive orientation of most students' education. The choice of the comparative scientific method as the organizational principle of the course is designed partially to impart an active problem-solving orientation. The specification of a nontrivial, even passionately important, dependent

The choice of the comparative scientific method as the organizational principle of the course is designed partially to impart an active problem-solving orientation.

variable was also intended, partially, to pique students' interests and concerns. The comparative scientific method, therefore, attacks parochialism by exposing students to comparison. It also introduces them to what political science is, as opposed to analysis or philosophy. (These latter are important in their own right, but not at issue here.) However, in spite of the many benefits of adopting a problem-solving approach as the methodology of the course, student passiveness is still difficult to overcome.

Two specific pedagogical techniques reinforce active learning. The first is a collaborative learning exercise that I call "the country project." It evolved from the frustrating time constraint that permits us in the quarter system to examine only four countries. It also evolved from feedback from many employers who hire our graduates and find their interactive skills with co-workers, superiors, and inferiors to

be distinctly underdeveloped. In fact, most undergraduate education, especially in the social sciences and the humanities, but even in the natural sciences and engineering disciplines, takes place in an interactive vacuum. A typical example: Attend class conscientiously, take good notes, do the reading, and you too will get a good grade—without having spoken to a single fellow student, nor, most often, with the teacher! Most workplaces, however, are exactly the opposite. Most of what students will accomplish as employees will be collaboratively based, in team projects and in interactions with peers and all layers of an organizational hierarchy.

I assign students to groups of four. Each group is required to select a country from among the countries that are not a part of our case set for the term. For the project, the team must prepare a 15–20 page "briefing paper" on the chosen country outlining the major contours of the political system, the economy, the social system, and the principal domestic and foreign policy issues currently facing the country. The (fictitious) model to emulate is that of a State Department briefing paper such as might be prepared for senior United States government officials who are to visit or have dealings with countries that fall outside of their areas of personal expertise. Perhaps most radical, each briefing paper is graded as a whole; each group member is assigned the same grade as that assigned to the group as a whole. It is therefore each group member's responsibility to ensure that all other members contribute adequately and legitimately to the project. This feature of the project always elicits a great deal of anxiousness.

Even more extensively incorporated into this course is the active learning technique of the case method. The case method of teaching focuses on the concrete unfolding of a specific chain of complex events with a multiplicity of diverse actors and institutions, all revolving around a particular issue. In comparative politics and international relations, many good cases are

available from the Harvard Business School, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and the Pew Case Program at Georgetown University. They may be ordered by any bookstore and usually do not cost more than about \$3.00 per student per case. Many cases also come with specialized teaching notes for the instructor's use.

In this introductory course, I use at least one case per country to illustrate more tangibly how political relations are organized regarding specific issues. For example, for Britain there is a Harvard Business School case on the machine tool industry that also involves explicit comparisons of the business-government relations in machine tools in Britain to those in the United States, Japan, and Germany. Here the "business-government relations" focus is quite easily recast as patterns of state-society interaction, which is the dimension defining the dependent variable of the course. Likewise, a Pew case on opening Japanese construction markets to American contractors, a Harvard Business School case on Nike operations in China, and a Kennedy School case on developing the milk industry in India, all illustrate important principles of state-society relations as inferred from the specifics and particularities of each case.

For each case study, I require a five-page analytical paper that is due the day that the case discussion is scheduled, at the beginning of the class period. This ensures that every student has prepared the case. The papers and the discussions are designed to elicit from the students the meaning of the case from a host of perspectives relevant to the course. Therefore, good cases, from a perspective seeking to promote active learning, are ones characterized by a conspicuous absence of analysis: just facts, including all of their complexity, ambiguity, and incompleteness. This forces the students to tease through the mass of data in search of the general principles and observations at play. Moreover, from an active-learning perspective, good cases also lend themselves to lively

argument or debate. Not only are empirical processes on display, revealing in themselves about political authority patterns in a given country, but the positive and negative consequences that flow from these processes are open to different interpretations. For example, students should be arguing about the impact of the India milk pattern on prospects for Indian politics and economics in general based on the facts of the case. There is no better way to generate critical thinking in a classroom.

Limitations of This Approach

As with the proverbial "free" lunch, costs and sacrifices are attached to the approach to the introductory course that I have outlined. The most obvious ones

. . . my decision to stress the cultivation of analytical skills appropriate to political science rather than the acquisition of facts about politics.

revolve around the numerous trade-offs required throughout. Because the time constraints of an academic term introduce a zero-sum element to the pedagogy, every choice to do X is simultaneously also a choice to drop Y. Many trade-offs occur.

The most important trade-off revolves around my decision to stress the cultivation of *analytical skills* appropriate to political science rather than the *acquisition of facts* about politics. But the trade-off that buys a stress on analytical skills introduces the real problematic of what readings to assign. There are some satisficing solutions but no perfectly satisfactory ones. One could forego the standard textbook entirely, incorporating instead an important work of "real" social science. Both Moore and Bendix,

for example, are still available in low-priced paper editions. Both books ask big questions; both follow a single analytical framework throughout. They are both based on identifying a single dependent variable (between the two, practically the same one) and searching for an independent variable that explains the variance of the dependent variable.

One could also choose a country-study book for each country covered. Or one could stick with a good, traditional textbook (there are many on the market), using it to fill in the empirical detail. If one does not choose to use a standard textbook, then the instructor must fill in for the students a good amount of factual information about the country's political institutions, processes, and actors. All this theorizing cannot be done in an empirical vacuum. Factual information can be provided in lectures or through the means of a detailed 10- or 12-page, single-spaced handout per country that sketches in the main details. But it should not be assumed that students will learn all they might need to know about any single country, for it is impossible for any individual instructor to provide the wealth of rich detail comparable to that found in any of the very good textbooks presently on the market.

Pitching the Class, or What Is the Bottom Line Here?

Some of the approach that I have described here is clearly designed for a course taught in a major research university or elite private college. This is particularly true in the sacrifice of a normal textbook in favor of classic readings in comparative political science. Reading Reinhard Bendix or Barrington Moore, even for graduate students, can be a daunting task and must be handled with care by the instructor. In some settings, a normal textbook with its greater richness of empirical description of processes and institutions in each country may make more sense.

Nonetheless, apart from the question of calibrating the required

reading, I will contend that little else in the course need differ from one type of higher education institution to another. Students in all colleges and universities need to become active learners. The comparative scientific method focuses on an important dependent variable, that is, on an important problem in political science. And because the whole enterprise is comparative, it works to mitigate parochialism among students everywhere.

Students from all types of educational institutions are characterized by the attributes set forth here. They are passive, parochial, and initially uncommitted to political science. Yet, in the face of the important challenges that will confront them once they leave higher education, it is crucial that they become more active problem-solvers, open their horizons to other

parts of the world, and develop a sense for how politics is important to human beings everywhere. We must do a better job of training thinkers and doers, rather than treating our students as merely passive vessels for the receiving of facts.

Notes

*David D. Laitin, now of the University of Chicago, had a substantial impact on the early formulation of my teaching philosophy and on some of the important, specific features of the pedagogy for introductory comparative politics that I outline here, in particular the focus on variables and the scientific method as a plausible and compelling way of teaching undergraduates comparative political science. His influence has shaped many of the specifics and the general concepts presented here. I also thank Sheilah Mann, Joseph Klesner, and two anonymous referees for serious and thoughtful critiques of an earlier version of this es-

say. Nonetheless, weaknesses and contradictions in this approach are, of course, my own.

1. The importance of case selection to the integrity of the scientific process that then unfolds has been forever impressed upon me by Arend Lijphart, who has been mentor, friend, and exacting taskmaster since graduate school. Indeed, I owe to him my emphasis on the indispensability of the comparative method to the whole political science enterprise. (Some students, however, wish I had never studied with Lijphart—or Laitin, too, for that matter!)

About the Author

David Wilsford is president and professor at the Institute for American Universities in Aix-en-Provence, France. He is the author of *Doctors and the State* (Duke University Press, 1991) and is currently completing a book comparing health care politics in the advanced industrial democracies, *The Political Economy of Health Care*. He is also working on an introductory text for the comparative politics course for Harcourt Brace.

Teaching Administrative Ethics with Help from Jefferson

Henry T. Edmondson III, *Georgia College*

An important question in public administration education asks whether moral education should concentrate primarily on intellectual skills or moral character. Another way of stating this is to ask whether the education of students should aim at refined intellectual skills or instinctive and habitual patterns of behavior. The debate is over whether the teaching of administrative ethics should be aimed at “*improving the moral cognitive capacities*,” focusing on the development of moral judgment and an attitude of moral responsibility toward the public service . . . or whether the fundamental goal should be directed at *cultivating moral character and moral conduct*” (Hejka-Ekins 1988, 885).

Lilla argues that morality is a way of life, not a method of analysis, and by bringing abstract ethical reasoning to the study of public administration, the ethics movement helps to *create* a moral vac-

uum rather than fill one. He describes the popular movement of ethics in government as a “paradox,” because it promotes ethics without first emphasizing “moral education” (1981, 4). An exclusively intellectual approach is likely to produce administrators who are “shrewd in the convenient application of ethical principles, rather than administrators with integrity” (1981, 13).

To better understand the debate, it is helpful to note that many courses in administrative ethics seem to be based on the premise that by the time students are enrolled in the undergraduate or graduate curriculum, the opportunity has passed for shaping their moral character. When dealing with adults, often it is assumed that the most the instructor can hope for is to refine the student’s analytical skills. These presuppositions determine, in part, the curricular approach taken in the classroom.

Thomas Jefferson and the Character-Cognition Debate

It is comforting to see that Thomas Jefferson also questioned whether education should be aimed primarily at teaching cognitive skills or developing character. His educational thought offers a helpful perspective on this issue.

While Jefferson resolutely believed in the character-building goal of education, he was curiously ambivalent when considering studies in moral philosophy as a means to achieve that goal. Moral philosophy, which typically consisted of studies in ethics, politics, and economics represents a cognitive approach to moral behavior. In most of his proposals for university curricula, Jefferson includes a course in moral philosophy, while in informal discussions he appears to contradict his formal proposals. For example, he advised a nephew in 1787 that time is spent vainly in the