

**ASEM 2420
The Cultured Ape
Spring 2016**

Reading Questions for Pinker, Chapters 1-5

Chapter 1: The Official Theory.

- Why did the Blank Slate become the “official theory” for understanding human nature? Who are the Enlightenment thinkers that are responsible?
- What are the the “Noble Savage” and the “Ghost in the Machine”? How do they fit with Blank Slate thinking?

Chapter 2: Silly Putty.

- What do Skinner, Boas, and Durkheim have to do with 20th century versions of Blank Slate thinking? Why is this chapter entitled “Silly Putty”?

Chapter 3: The Last Wall to Fall.

- What are the 5 basic lessons of what Pinker calls the “Cognitive Revolution”? Which one strikes you as most interesting and/or relevant for our work this quarter?
- What are the basic conceptual commitments of Evolutionary Psychology?

Chapter 4: Culture Vultures.

- What’s the debate about “culture”? How does Pinker settle it?
- What, for Pinker, are the “good” and “bad” forms of reductionism?

Chapter 5: The Slate’s Last Stand.

- How did Blank Slate “Last Standers” attempt to salvage the theory? In other words, what observations and arguments did they use to defend the Blank Slate?
- Looking back on these 5 chapters, where does Pinker hit and where does he miss? Be specific, and draw on “money quotes.”

Pinker TED-talking about the Blank Slate:

http://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_chalks_it_up_to_the_blank_slate