

ASEM 2420
The Cultured Ape
Spring 2016

Reading Questions for Pinker, Chapters 6-11

A lot is packed into these six chapters. **Here are the three most basic questions:**

1. What are the major “biophobias” that have been expressed about what Pinker calls the “new sciences of human nature”? What are the concerns that drive the fears?
2. Where is Pinker good in showing that the fear is exaggerated? Where—if anywhere—is his response unconvincing? In other words, is there one or another fear that still should be taken seriously?
3. What is one argument, observation, issue, or debate described in these chapters that you found particularly interesting, and why?

Also consider these questions:

4. American anthropology is still reeling from the “Darkness in El Dorado” affair. What was that episode all about?
5. Given that this is an election year, we might attend to Pinker’s discussion of how the Political/Religious/Cultural Right (perhaps best exemplified by Ted Cruz) and the Political/Secular/Cultural Left (perhaps best exemplified by Bernie Sanders) relate to the issues at stake in these chapters. What does Pinker say about areas of disagreement and agreement between Right and Left?
6. Pinker claims that adopting a position of “environmental determinism” to explain human psychology and behavior *can be just as bad* as adopting a position of “biological determinism.” How so????

Key concepts and names to look for in the reading:

Concepts: Sociobiology, Great Asymmetry, Social Darwinism, Naturalistic Fallacy, Moralistic Fallacy, Eugenics, Moral Circle, Modernism, Doctrine of Soul, Moral Realism, Golden Rule.

Names: Herrnstein, E.O Wilson, Dawkins, Gould, Chagnon, Tierney, Delay, Singer, Dennett.