I. The Official Theory (ch. 1)

A. What does Pinker mean by the doctrine of “the blank slate”? What are the social-political value does he believe it has? (5-6)

B. What does Pinker mean by the doctrine of “the noble savage”? (6-8)

C. What does Pinker mean by the doctrine of “the ghost in the machine”? How does Pinker believe the three doctrines are connected? (8-11)

II. Silly Putty (ch. 2)

A. How does Pinker suggest that the doctrine of the blank slate became entrenched in our intellectual life, in part, as a reaction to racism and sexism? (14-18)

B. How do associationism and behaviorism in psychology both presuppose the doctrine of the blank slate? (18-22)

C. How do major tendencies in this century’s attempts to think about human culture presuppose a version of the doctrine of the blank slate - what Pinker refers to with the metaphor of “silly putty”? (22-26)

D. How does Pinker suggest that modern social science has also been attracted to the doctrines of the noble savage and the ghost in the machine? (26-29)

III. The Last Wall to Fall (ch. 3)

A. What is “the last wall to fall”? (30-31)

B. How does cognitive science help bridge the gap between biology and culture? (31-41)?

1. What is the “computational theory of mind” and how does it explain “how rationality can emerge from a mindless physical process”? (31-34)

2. How does Chomsky’s idea of a “generative grammar” suggest how “an infinite range of behavior can be generated by finite combinatorial programs in the mind” and “universal mental mechanisms can underlie superficial variation across culture”? (36-39)

C. How does cognitive neuroscience help bridge the gap between the mental and the physical? (41-45)
1. How do the studies with split-brain patients (who have had “the corpus callosum joining the cerebral hemispheres” cut in two) demonstrate the illusory character of the idea “that there is a single ‘I’ in control” in our mental lives (an idea which Pinker associates with the doctrine of the ghost in the machine)? (43)

2. How does the genetic determination of the physical structure of the brain and the way “variations on that typical plan” are correlated with “variations in the way (the) mind works” undermine the gap between the mental and the physical? (44-45)

D. How does behavioral genetics help bridge the gap between the biological and the mental? (45-51)

1. How do studies with identical twins give us reason to believe that genes play a significant role in predisposing us to psychological traits and forms of behavior? (45-47)

2. How have geneticists made inroads into identifying specific genes which impact specific mental traits? (47-48)

3. Why is it wrong to believe that “if the genes affect the mind at all they must determine it in every detail”? (48-49)

E. How does evolutionary psychology help bridge the gap between biology and culture? (51-58)

1. How do studies in anthropology, child psychology, archeology, and primatology all support the idea that “the mind evolved with a universal complex design”? (55)

2. How does evolutionary psychology suggest that the doctrine of the noble savage is wrong? How does Pinker believe the evidence tells against the noble savage doctrine? Why does Pinker believe the debunking of the noble savage doctrine does not undermine our opposition to “wip(ing) out indigenous peoples and steal(ing) their lands”? (55-58)

IV. The Fear of Inequality (ch. 8 - but also read the preface to Part III, 137-139)

A. What is the lesson that Pinker wants us to take from the story he tells of Galileo? (137-139)

B. What sorts of genetic differences between groups does Pinker believe we might discover? (142-145)
1. What does it mean to refer to humans as a “small species” and why does this imply that the differences between us “are small in biological terms, and they are found to a far greater extent among the individual members of an ethnic group or race than between ethnic groups or races.” (142-143)

2. What sorts of differences between races and the sexes does this insight (that we are a “small species) still allow as possible? (142-145)

C. How does Pinker argue that discoveries in biology could not turn out to justify racism and sexism? (145-149)

1. How does Noam Chomsky make his point that “A correlation between race and IQ (were this shown to exist) entails no social consequences except in a racist society”? (146-147)

2. Why does Pinker believe the possible economic rationality of discrimination (whether possible differences between groups are genetic or environmental in origin) is still not a sufficient justification for racial or sexual discrimination? (147)

D. Why does Pinker believe the blank slate is not necessary to combat Social Darwinism - “the belief that the rich and the poor deserve their status”? (149-151)

1. How does the point that “the likelihood that inborn differences are one contributor to social status does not mean that it is the only contributor” undermine the attempt to justify Social Darwinism on the basis of “inborn talents”? (150)

2. How does Pinker argue that “even if inherited talents can lead to socioeconomic success, it doesn’t mean that the success is deserved in a moral sense? How does the Social Darwinist commit the “naturalistic fallacy”? (150-151)

E. How does Pinker answer this objection: since drawing the conclusion that people are biologically unequal “might be used to the worst ends by bigots or Social Darwinists, shouldn’t we err on the side of caution and stick with the hypothesis that people are identical?” (151-152)

F. How does Pinker argue that biological insights into human nature do not imply support for a program of human eugenics (selectively breeding for people with certain traits)? (152-153)

G. The specter of Nazism (153-158)

1. How does Pinker argue that we should not reject a biological conception
of human nature simply because the Nazis supported it?

2. How do the Marxist atrocities Pinker cites help him to make his case that it wasn’t the Nazi’s attraction to a biological conception of human nature that was real source of their oppressive violence but rather something the Nazis shared with the Marxists - “a desire to reshape humanity”? (155-158)

V. The Fear of Imperfectibility (ch.9)

A. How does a biological conception of human nature give rise to the fear of imperfectibility? How does Pinker describe the specific motives for this fear associated with violence, sexuality, and selfishness? (159-162)

B. The fear of imperfectibility and the romantic belief that what is natural is good. (162-165)

1. What is the “moralistic fallacy” and how is it connected to the “naturalistic fallacy”? How is the fear of imperfectibility rooted in these fallacies? (162)

2. How are the naturalistic/moralistic fallacies illustrated by the reaction of some (like “feminist scholar Susan Brownmiller”) to Randy Thornhill’s thesis that rape is a consequence of men’s sexuality and by those on the “religious and cultural right” who condemn homosexuality (among other things) as “unnatural”? (162-164)

3. How does Pinker illustrate how we need to appeal to more than facts to determine our choices (as they naturalistic fallacy would have us do), but also “values and a method of resolving conflicts among them” with his discussion of rape and stepparents’ greater likelihood (than biological parents) to abuse their children? (164-165)

C. Rising above our nature (165-169)

1. “If we are put in this world to rise above nature, how do we do it?” What does Pinker mean when he says we should rise above nature? (166)

2. How does Peter Singer’s idea of “the expanding circle” help to explain “how continuous moral progress can emerge from a fixed moral sense”? What are the three features of human nature that Wright invokes to explain the steady expansion of that circle? (166-169)

D. How do the ideas of B.F. Skinner, La Courbusier, and some feminists illustrate what Pinker sees as the problem with dreams of human perfectibility motivated by
VI. Gender (ch. 18)

A. Feminism and Human Nature (337-341)

1. Why is feminism “widely seen as being opposed to the sciences of human nature?” (338-339)

2. How are some conservatives “confirming feminists’ worst fears by invoking dubious sex differences to condemn the choices of women”? (339-340)

B. Gender Feminism and Sexual Differences (341-351)

1. How does Pinker distinguish between what he calls equity feminism and gender feminism? (341-343)

2. What are some of the mental and behavioral differences between men and women that Pinker notes? (344-345)

3. What evidence does Pinker refer to in order to contest the claims of gender feminists that “all sex differences, other than the anatomical ones, come from the expectations of parents, playmates, and society?” (346-351) In particular . . .

   a. How are many of the psychological differences between the sexes what an evolutionary biologist would predict? (346)

   b. How does the production of androgens and estrogen affect the development of the brains of boys and girls and their behavior? (347 & 348)

   c. How have scientists managed to accomplish “the ultimate fantasy experiment”: “tak(ing) a baby boy, giv(ing) him a sex change operation, and hav(ing) his parents raise him as a girl and other people treat him as one”? And, of course, what does this tell us about the question of the biological basis of some gender traits? (348-349)

C. The “Glass Ceiling” (351-359)

1. What is the “glass ceiling”? What is the “leaky pipeline” (in science and engineering)? What are the two explanations Pinker considers for these phenomena? Why does Pinker believe that “inequality of outcome cannot
be used as proof of inequality of *opportunity*”? (351-353)

2. What are the “three points that are not in dispute” that Pinker stresses on p. 354?

3. How does Pinker argue that average differences in *ability* and *preferences* between men and women may account for the different proportions of men and women in different professions? (355-357)

4. How does Pinker suggest that acknowledging sex differences can be beneficial to women? (358-359)

D. Rape (359-371)

1. What, according to Pinker, is Brownmiller’s thesis regarding rape? How does Pinker argue against her thesis by suggesting that rape can be about both violence *and* sex and that it is unreasonable to suppose that rape is an act in which men “further the interests of their gender”? (361-363)

2. What, according to Pinker, is Thornhill and Palmer’s thesis regarding rape? How do they argue in Darwinian terms that rape could be an opportunistic mating tactic selected by nature (or, at least, not selected against) and that, for women, rape subverts a form of sexual choice that is equally a product of evolution? (364-365)

3. What is the gender-feminist argument that the motives of rapists do not include sex? How does Pinker challenge that argument? (367-368)

VII. Children (ch. 19)

A. The Three Laws (372-381)

1. The First Law. (373-378)

a. How does the concept of heritability presuppose the concept of variance? What sorts of studies can enable us to discern the heritability of behavioral traits? (373-374)

b. How much of the variance in behavioral traits such as “intelligence, personality, and life outcomes” is heritable, according to Pinker? (374)

c. How have critics challenged identical twin studies and how does Pinker defend these studies? (375-376)
d. What are the three limitations of behavioral genetic studies that Pinker emphasizes on p. 377?

2. The Second and Third Laws. (378-381)
   a. How do we know, according to Pinker, that the effects of the “shared environment” on personality and behavior are small, “often a big fat zero”? (378-379)
   b. How does the sample of homes studied affect the conclusion of the Second Law (Pinker’s “important proviso”)? (380)
   c. How do we know that the effects of the “unique environment” on personality and behavior is substantially larger than the “shared environment”? (380-381)

B. The Effects of Parenting (383-390)
   1. What problems does Pinker find with the research on children’s development that finds parenting to be an important factor in shaping a child’s personalities and behavioral traits? (383-387)
   2. Why does Pinker reject the possibilities that differences in parenting practices between children of the same family or birth order within the same family might significantly affect children’s personalities and behavioral traits? (387-390)

C. What is Harris’ Group Socialization theory? Why does Pinker think it plausible? How does this theory indirectly give an important role to parents in shaping their children? (390-392)

D. What does Pinker think is the major limitation of Harris’ Group Socialization theory? How does she attempt to deal with this limitation by appealing to how children differentiate themselves within peer groups by filling different niches? Why does Pinker think this idea ultimately leads us in the direction of acknowledging the role of “luck” in human development and even the concept of “fate”? (395-398)

E. Why does Pinker believe that Harris’ theory does not imply that it doesn’t matter how parents raise their children? (398-399)