This is obviously more than a purely cosmetic matter. There is plenty of evidence that teachers and others in authority treat students of shorter than average height as younger than their age, and thus do not challenge them intellectually or take them seriously. The human growth hormone thus serves as a biochemical solution to a social problem. All parents want their children to be above average.

While chemical aids for adapting to society aren’t new, the artificial growth hormone is highly specific and powerful, and a potent of more to come. Indeed, it’s probably possible to synthesize all the elements of the hormonal storm we assume to be raging in the young, and to use these to fine-tune at least the endocrinological development of the adolescent.

Let’s pretend that’s possible right now. How would we redesign our teenagers? Would we want the growth spurt and physical maturity to come later than it does now? Would we look for a way to postpone females’ ability to conceive? Can humans achieve the intellectual and moral breakthroughs that are characteristic of these years without the bodies that come with them? And if we did, who would play football? Who would go to war?

This line of speculation is scary. We don’t know enough about how hormones work. There is, however, reason to believe that they help shape behavior and mental capacity as well as physical development. What makes it even scarier is that it’s easy to imagine someone trying to do this for real. Finessing the social or moral problem by finding a technological solution for it is, after all, the American way.

Synthesized hormones will no doubt play a role in the future, but the reality of the teen years is far more than a physiological storm. It is also a matter of psychic development, and most of all, it is a set of cultural expectations. If you expunge the biochemical determinism from the questions above, you come up with issues that societies have grappled with since ancient times. What does it mean to be grown up, and how should it be recognized? What is important for young people to know, and how should they be taught? What special role should young people play in society? How do children contribute to the wealth of their parents, and how should that wealth be allocated to the children?

These are issues that are implicit in the project of contemporary, technologically advanced society to classify physically developed people as socially immature for a steadily increasing portion of their lives. The institutions and expectations we have invented to deal with such ques-

When Holden Caulfield talks about the phases people go through, though, he is not talking about either the actions of his glands or the strictures of his society. He’s talking about psychological changes, storm and stress brought on not so much by raging hormones as by the challenges inherent in his time of life. In the United States in the immediate post–World War II era, people sought to understand adolescence mostly in the psychoanalytic terms proposed by Sigmund Freud. Adolescent psychology, a field invented by the American educator G. S. Hall at the turn of the century, rested on Freudian ideas and also on Darwinian evolutionary theory and a general faith in progress.

The word “adolescent,” which comes from a Latin root meaning “to nourish,” derives from a word used by the ancient Romans and came into English, via French, in the fourteenth century. It meant someone who was still growing, often but not necessarily a teenager. Since the turn of the twentieth century, however, adolescence has referred to a specific period of life fraught with a series of difficult psychic challenges. Generally, adolescence has been assumed to begin at puberty, although the Carnegie Commission on Adolescent Development has recently sought to push recognition of its onset back to ten years of age.

One of the key premises of Hall and his colleagues was that the adolescent might suffer from symptoms that would be considered mad in an adult, but are just the part of normal mental development for the young person. Anna Freud believed that the reason we don’t remember our adolescent years is that they were so troubling that we suppress them. “What we fail to recover, as a rule,” she wrote of adult memories of youth, “is the atmosphere in which the adolescent lives, his anxieties, the height of elation or depth of despair, the burning—or at times sterile—in tellectual and philosophical preoccupations, the yearning for freedom, the sense of loneliness, the feeling of oppression by parents, the impotent rages or active hates directed against the adult world, the erotic crushes—whether homosexually or heterosexually directed—the suicidal fantasies, etc.”

The rise of adolescent psychology was one of the key events in the history of the American teenager. It established the adolescent as a special,
unstable sort of creature. Moreover, it gave rise, soon after Hall’s *Adolescence* appeared in 1904, to what might be termed the Holden Caulfield excuse: “I’m only an adolescent, so I’m not responsible for what I do.”

The place for a detailed discussion of Hall’s ideas and their implications is in its historical context. What is important at this point is to note the way that the idea of the adolescent seems to deny either historical or cultural context. The adolescent was seen as someone who always had been and always will be.

Adolescence as a painful, stormy, yet precious and crucial passage in one’s life was not a wholly new idea. Its greatest expression is probably *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s description of the ideal education of one boy. The premise of this philosophical narrative is that Rousseau has undertaken to raise an imaginary, noble boy literally from the cradle until he is ready to take his place as a good and civilized man. Because he believes that society leads young people astray, he has raised the boy in isolation. But despite his being sheltered from corrupting conditions, at fifteen or sixteen, Rousseau writes, a crisis is on the horizon:

> As the roaring of the sea preceded a tempest from afar, this stormy revolution is proclaimed by the murmur of the nascent passions. A mute fermentation warns of danger’s approach. A change in humor, frequent anger, a mind in constant agitation makes the child almost unmanageable. He becomes deaf to the voice which made him docile. His feverishness turns him into a lion. He disregards his guide; he no longer wishes to be governed. . . . This is the second birth of which I have spoken. It is now that man is truly born to life and now that nothing human is foreign to him.

This description, while more eloquent than most, is certainly a familiar recounting of what, even today, are viewed as the chief symptoms of adolescence. Rousseau makes it clear that what has happened to *Émile* is a result of the emergence of sex drives.

Rousseau’s recommended approach to raising the young man was “to delay the progress of nature to the advantage of reason.” His teacher even sleeps in the same room as his student to make sure that he never masturbates. Rousseau says the teacher must seize this moment to channel the boy’s maturing desires toward learning. “This age never lasts long enough for the use that ought to be made of it,” Rousseau writes. “That’s why I insist on prolonging it. Make progress by sure steps. Pre-
drive, particularly in adolescence, is toward developing a realistic picture of the world.

Piaget's work offers alternative interpretations of what have been termed classic adolescent behaviors. For example, intellectualization—the tendency by older teens to become obsessed with logical proofs of God's existence, or hunt for hidden meanings in rock lyrics—has traditionally been seen as a way of avoiding important issues. Piaget's analysis suggests that it might simply be a matter of trying out one's newfound mental capabilities.

One of the most important claims of adolescent psychology, at least during the first half of the century, was that the phenomena it describes are universal. It said that in every place and at every time, humans have suffered the insult of expulsion from the womb. It then follows that they must find ways of defining themselves and controlling their feelings. Ultimately, in the struggles and suffering of adolescence there comes a crisis and, if things go right, its resolution.

The discovery and description of the adolescent as a universal concept spurred an interest in young people in different places and times. The goal was not to see how young people lived their lives at different times, but rather to prove that adolescents had always existed in much the same way—whether in the waning days of Hapsburg Vienna, the Athens of Aristotle, or the Hippo of Augustine.

If you look, it's possible to find wonderful passages that seem contemporary, and even timeless. An eleventh-century Japanese girl complains of her mother's "extremely antiquated mind." Aristotle's description of youth as "prone to desire and ready to carry out any desire they may have formed into action" sounds a familiar note. He added, "They are changeable too and fickle in their desires, which are as transitory as they are vehement." Besides, said Aristotle, they're always thinking about sex.

These quotations are from an influential 1964 anthology, _The Universal Experience of Adolescence_ by Norman Kiell. This tome consists of passages from autobiographical writing throughout history that demonstrate aspects of the adolescent psyche, particularly as Anna Freud described them. As an example of risk-taking behavior, for example, there is a passage in which an eighteenth-century Italian describes how gangs of boys would steal horses and rampage through the countryside. These joyriders were not only in the textbooks; their counterparts were in the
newspaper every day and in movies like Rebel Without a Cause. Except for a few details, this recollection by Montaigne could be a posting on the Internet: “I was always ready to imitate the negligent garb still to be seen among our young men—my cloak across the shoulder, my hood to one side, and a stocking in disorder, all of which was meant to show a proud disdain for these exotic trumperies and a contempt for everything artificial.”

These and the hundreds of other passages in this and similar books prove that people have had many of the same feelings over time, and that people keep getting themselves in the same awkward situations. Youthful impetuousity, bravado, and awkwardness also appear throughout many literatures. These probably are common elements of being young. But that doesn’t mean that the storm-tossed adolescent is an inevitable and universal phenomenon.

When Holden Caulfield talks about the phases people go through, one imagines a note of hope in his voice. Soon, no doubt, all the misery he’s going through will be over. Had he actually studied the psychoanalytically oriented writings that dominated thinking about adolescence in his time, he would have been much less hopeful.

Holden seems to have been nourishing what the influential psychoanalyst Peter Blos called “the rescue fantasy”—the hope that the environment will change and what seem to be problems now will disappear without effort. Blos says it’s dangerous to indulge in that fantasy. Each challenge of coping with Mom and Dad still remains. Each failure can lead to neuroses in later life, symptoms of “incomplete adolescence.” Worst of all is “miscarried adolescence,” which leaves a person completely unable to cope with being an adult.

While most of the psychoanalytic literature on adolescence relies on studies of severely troubled young people, its concept of normality is often synonymous with absolute perfection. In particular, its concentration on what has come to be known as the nuclear family seems to doom the many children who grow up in other sorts of environments. As one reads of the crucial developmental challenges children face and the role of both parents as sources of ideals, eros, conflict, and approval, the fatherless or motherless child does not seem to have a chance of growing up satisfactorily.

Yet, in most times and places, disease, hunger, and the perils of childbirth have made the family of mother, father, and children more

the exception than the rule. Psychoanalysis is a product of the late-nineteenth-century view of the family as bourgeois refuge, and, in many respects, it is also a description of the problems that ideal brings into being.

Despite their claims to universality, the much-watered-down psychoanalytic views that underlie popular discourse on the problems of youth are time-bound and culture-bound. They described a very narrow bourgeois milieu at the time they were conceived, and they triumphed in America at the time that middle-class comforts were becoming available to everyone. But many things have changed, including our ideas of the roles of each sex. The nature of adolescence must inevitably change as well.

Erik Erikson, inventor of the term “identity crisis,” is perhaps the most lastingly influential of the psychoanalytic thinkers on adolescence. One of his most important contributions was to find a place for history in the forging of identity, which he viewed as the crucial task of adolescence. “Adolescence, then, is a stage in which the individual is much closer to the historical day than he is at earlier stages of child development,” Erikson wrote. “While the infantile antecedents of identity are more unconscious and change very slowly, if at all, the identity problem itself changes with the historical period: this is, in fact, its job.”

Erikson, like his psychoanalytic colleagues, placed adolescence in a life course continuum that begins with separation from the mother and is resolved by commitment to a heterosexual relationship. But he also recognized that in order to marry and have a family, you must have money and skills. Worry about how you are going to make a living is not a diversion from problems within the psyche. It is, rather, one of the ways in which the self is expressed in the world.

Erikson defined adolescence as a period of moratorium, a time for young people to integrate their skills, their knowledge of themselves, the judgment of their contemporaries and their elders. What should result is a feeling of wholeness and consistency, a sense of continuity between what you have come to be in childhood and what you expect to be in the future. A moratorium sounds like a peaceful thing, a far cry from Rousseau’s flash flood or Hall’s storm and stress. Erikson did say that some youths, particularly those who are gifted and who identify with coming technological trends, will probably make it through the period quite peacefully.
But, he added, what is at stake is serious, so if the process is thwarted, it has consequences. He writes: "Should a young person feel that the environment tries to deprive him too radically of all the forms of expression which permit him to develop and integrate the next step, he may resist with the wild strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives. For indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity."

It is possible to imagine societies that are so static that such components of identity as occupation, technical skills, and one's place in the community could pass from generation to generation unchanged. In such cases, Erikson said, the passage of generations can be ceremonialized in a way that is meaningful to all in the community. But Erikson argued that modern society was changing too rapidly for the older generations to create meaningful institutions to symbolize maturity, let alone pass along traditions they had inherited from their forebears. Indeed, he added, it was changing so rapidly that the young are unable to make any effective resistance to the change. They'll only hurt themselves trying.

While it was not the principal focus of Erikson's writings, his view of the historical dimension of the adolescent moratorium is powerful. It's natural that the expectations elders have for youth are going to be vague. Those old enough to be parents of teenagers know that they cannot predict with any confidence the world in which their children will live. Teenagers have to spend a lot of time talking with and exploring with their peers. Doing so is one of the best ways they have for predicting their own futures. The young "take things for granted" that were major struggles in the lives of their parents. Although this seems absurd, in cases of ingratitude, young people have struggles of their own. They can't afford to waste energy reliving the crises of their parents. The adolescent moratorium is the time to get a highly realistic picture of the world as it is.

The one element of this analysis that seems dated is that the fast-changing society Erikson described has accelerated still more. He assumed that it's possible to define during adolescence an occupational identity that can be maintained throughout the rest of one's life. That appears to be less and less likely, as technological change and corporate restructuring force people well into middle age to reassess aspects of identity they thought they had determined decades before. Today's adolescents may even have to deal with parents who are going through some of the same crises they are coping with themselves.

Today's youth will not be able to use occupational identity as a foundation stone of their sense of themselves. They will have to find substitutes that are more durable while permitting greater change. Older people may complain about the hardships they had to endure when they were growing up, but when it comes to the things that really count, it never gets any easier to be young.

Erikson once observed that the freedom to change—the belief that one can suddenly become someone else—is a particularly American dimension of identity. There has probably never been a culture in which the quest for an individual identity has been as important, and thus as fraught with problems, as that of the United States. Americans believe that each individual is unique. We learn that any boy or girl in the country can grow up to be a billionaire, a rock idol, or president of the United States. This individualist myth sometimes, it is true, produces a good deal of conformity, as many people seem to mold themselves into the same memorable individual. Advertising aimed at the young often urges them to express their inner selves by purchasing a product. The willingness of young consumers to buy mass-produced affirmations of their uniqueness may belie the notion of a nation of individuals. Still, such advertising could not be successful unless it was speaking to a pressure felt by members of its target market.

In our mythology, each person must find his or her own role in life. We all know that some people are born into circumstances that give them considerably more freedom than others. In returning to first principles, we return to the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, with its self-evident truths and Creator-bestowed rights. Rarely do we think that people are, or ought to be, born into a particular role in life, though that has probably been the norm in most times and places. Nor do we view a role in society as being a gift that its holder can pass on to a protégé. We expect the younger person to have to compete fairly for the role, through a process that is, somehow, impersonal. Indeed, we assume the elder incumbent probably doesn't fully understand what ought to be required of a successor who will face a whole new set of challenges.

There is no question that having an influential family or being known to the right people can benefit an American's career. But we tend to view this as an example of life's unfairness, not as evidence that a natural order prevails. Often, it seems that being known as the child of an important member of the community—the minister's son, for instance—
poses an impediment to identity formation. People don't come out of nowhere, but we pretend we do.

The belief in self-creation is, very likely, one of the glories of American culture. It seems likely that in cultures where more of one's identity is preordained and each individual need not start from scratch, some of the trials we associate with adolescence would disappear. Is that true? Do other cultures magnify other aspects of the maturation process? Are there some aspects of adolescence that we choose not to recognize? One way to approach these questions is to take a look at the way some other cultures think about what we assume to be problems inherent in adolescence.

THREE
Coming of Age in Utter Confusion

In the region of central Africa where feminine beauty is all but identified with obesity, the girl at puberty is segregated, sometimes for years, fed with sweet and fatty foods, allowed no activity and her body rubbed assiduously with oils. She is taught during this time her future duties and her seclusion ends with a parade of her corpulence that is followed by her marriage to her proud bridegroom.

—RUTH BENEDICT, Patterns of Culture (1934)

Other cultures often look crazy from the outside. Benedict's description of the "fattening house," in which young women in their teens were treated like Strasbourg geese, seems bizarre and grotesque.

Here's another scenario that may be even stranger. Throughout her teenage years, a young woman is bombarded with advertising for fatty snack foods, and she is constantly being asked, "Fries with that?" At the same time, she is told constantly that her future happiness depends on being extremely thin. This is the situation young women face in contemporary America. It's an odd practice, but we tend not to think it so. It's how we live.

The Central African practice, the expression of a "primitive" culture, had at least the virtue of being internally consistent. It prepared the young woman for the next stage of her life. The contemporary American practice has failure built into it. For the last twenty years or so, eating disorders have become epidemic among young women (and they have become more common among young men as well). Obesity is also increasing among people in their teens. Living in a junk food culture, their minds marinated in unrealistic images of what their bodies should be, contemporary teenagers must find a way to balance these powerful contradictions and develop a healthy sense of themselves.