You need not be Peter Pan to feel uneasy about the prospect of becoming adult. Indeed, it’s easy to argue that Peter Pan, most drastically imitated by Michael Jackson, is an emblem of our times. Being grown-up is widely considered to be a matter of renouncing your hopes and dreams, accepting the limits of the reality you are given, and resigning yourself to a life that will be less adventurous, worthwhile and significant than you supposed when you began it. Simone de Beauvoir ended the third volume of her autobiography with the reflection that there wasn’t much of the world she hadn’t seen: ‘the opera of Peking, the arena of the Huelva, the dunes of El Oued, the dawns in Provence, Castro talking to five hundred thousand Cubans, the white nights of Leningrad, an orange moon over the Piraeus’. Not only did she travel the world at a time when, unlike ours, such travel could hardly be taken for granted; the loves and friendships, the meaningful work and the acclaim she received for it were nearly as numerous and varied as the places she saw. It’s hard to imagine a life more full or less wasted. Yet she concludes the enviable list of her travels with a look back at the girl she once was, ‘gazing at
WHY GROW UP?

the gold mine at my feet: a whole life to live’, and concludes that she was cheated. Some writers argue that few people these days want to grow up. But if adulthood is a matter of feeling, in one’s more honest moments, that one was cheated, who can blame them?

Can philosophy help us to find a model of maturity that is not a matter of resignation? (For the record, my Oxford Thesaurus lists ‘philosophical’ as a synonym for ‘resigned’.) I believe that it can, and the best place to begin is Immanuel Kant’s description of the process of reason’s coming of age towards the end of the Critique of Pure Reason. Readers may be forgiven for ignoring it. The Critique of Pure Reason (1781) is at once the most important and the worst-written book in the history of modern philosophy. Kant himself wrote that it was too long and too dry, before poignantly adding that it is ‘not given to everyone to write so subtly and gracefully as David Hume, or so profoundly and elegantly as Moses Mendelssohn’. True enough. Bertrand Russell was not the only reader to admit to falling asleep before he reached the end. Those who persevere, however, will find that his model of coming of age can be very compelling.

The infancy of reason is dogmatic. Small children incline to take what they are given as absolute truth. What perspective would allow them to question it? Those who suffer abuse at the hands of parental or priestly authority need years to realize that abuse is not simply part of the furniture of the universe – if
they ever realize it at all. In happier cases, each step the child takes seems to confirm both her own powers and the transparency of a world that initially seemed mysterious. She learns that spoons (and rattles and pudding) regularly fall down and not up when you drop them, that balls (and trucks and kittens) are objects that persist even when they roll behind the curtain. As her own capacities grow, the world becomes increasingly comprehensible. Why shouldn’t she assume that both are unlimited? Each day she understands a little more, each day another secret of her world is unravelled. For the small child, the dogmatic metaphysics of the seventeenth-century philosopher and consummate optimist Leibniz will seem obvious: had we but world enough and time, we would be able to know everything – and to understand that this world is the best of all possible ones. What else would make sense?

The next step of reason is scepticism, and though the word ‘adolescence’ was not invented in Kant’s day, he describes all its symptoms: the peculiar mixture of disappointment and exhilaration that accompanies the teenager’s discovery that the world is not the way it should be. Even at their very best – and we seldom are – parents and teachers have failings. (And those of us who have become parents and teachers ourselves have also been adolescents, just as surely as the rest of you.) They know less than we thought they did, they can offer fewer solutions than we hoped.
WHY GROW UP?

Even when they do not lie, they did not tell us all they could have; they want to shield us in the wrong ways and fail to protect us in the right ones. They embarrass us with habits and beliefs they inevitably acquired in an earlier era; they criticize what they don’t understand and hang on to times that have changed. Why shouldn’t we conclude that whatever truths and rules we learned from them were misguided; indeed, that the very ideas of truth and rule deserve to be laid to rest? Why shouldn’t we move from boundless trust in the world to boundless mistrust?

Kant says this step is more mature than the wide-eyed credulity of reason’s childhood, and therefore necessary and valuable. (To be sure, he never had to raise an adolescent.) But the wild swing from endless trust to permanent distrust is not yet maturity. Unsurprisingly, maturity is Kant’s metaphor for his own philosophy, which should give you the wisdom to find a path between mindlessly accepting everything you’re told and mindlessly rejecting it. Growing up is a matter of acknowledging the uncertainties that weave through our lives; often worse, of living without certainty while recognizing that we will inevitably continue to seek it. Such a standpoint is easier to describe than to consistently maintain, but then again, whoever said growing up would be easy?

The problem with all this, at first glance, is not that it’s hard but that it’s boring. Worse than boring, it sounds resigned. Is there more to this standpoint than
you could get from your harmless but well-meaning uncle, growing a belly, who tells you that life will be neither as wondrous as you thought in your childhood nor as tormented as you thought in your adolescence, and it’s time to buck up and make the best of it? Banal as it is, this statement is true, but it hardly seems worth striving for. Why not just skip Kant and listen to the Rolling Stones? If you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need. And speaking of harmless uncles: Kant’s life hardly seems a model of an adulthood to which you’d aspire. He never travelled further than forty miles from the place he was born, he never married; even the one rumour we have of a love affair remains unconfirmed. His adult life consisted of a routine of lectures, academic chores and writing so demanding and regular that his neighbours were said to set their watches by the daily walk he took to maintain his weak constitution. The poet Heinrich Heine went so far as to say that Kant’s life-history was easy to describe, for he had neither a life nor a history.

That same poet, however, also described Kant as a rebel who stormed the heavens and made the French revolutionary Robespierre seem humdrum. Nor was Heine alone. Most of Kant’s younger contemporaries felt much the same. We begin to see why when we turn to Kant’s most famous discussion of maturity, which occurs at the beginning of the Enlightenment’s best-known essay. ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1784)
defines it as reason’s emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. We choose immaturity because we are lazy and scared: how much more comfortable it is to let someone else make your decisions! ‘If I have a book that takes care of my understanding, a preacher who takes care of my conscience, a doctor who prescribes my diet, I need not make any effort myself. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will handle the business for me.’ (Even Kant could write straightforward sentences when he was writing for the Berlinische Monatsschrift, the eighteenth century’s version of The New York Review of Books.) With a familiarity surprising in a man who had no children, Kant describes the way they learn to walk. In order to do so they must stumble and fall, but preventing bruises by keeping them in a baby carriage is a recipe for keeping them infantile. Kant’s target, of course, is not over-protective mothers, but authoritarian states, for whom grown-up citizens are far more trouble than they’re worth. The state’s desire for control and our own desire for comfort combine to create societies with fewer conflicts, but they are not societies of grown-ups.

Growing up is more a matter of courage than knowledge: all the information in the world is no substitute for the guts to use your own judgement. And judgement can be learned – principally through the experience of watching others use it well – but it cannot be taught. Judgement is important because none
of the answers to the questions that really move us can be found by following a rule. Courage is not only required to learn how to trust your own judgement rather than relying on your state’s, your neighbour’s or your favourite movie star’s. (Of course, your state, your neighbour or your favourite movie star may often be right, and good judgement requires you to recognize that.) Even more important, courage is required to live with the rift that will run through our lives, however good they may be: ideals of reason tell us how the world should be; experience tells us that it rarely is. Growing up requires confronting the gap between the two – without giving up on either one.

Most of us are tempted to give up on one or the other. People who stick to the dogmas of childhood can spend whole lifetimes denying that the world does not conform to beliefs they hold dear. While examples of these abound – certain preachers and politicians come to mind – in our day it’s more common to meet people who are stuck in the mire of adolescence. The world turns out not to reflect the ideas and ideals they had for it? All the worse for ideals. Maintaining ideals in a world that seems to have no use for them becomes a source of disappointment, even shame. Far better to jettison them entirely than to suffer the memory of hope defeated; far braver to face the depth of the rot of reality than to cling to what turned out to be illusion.

Such a standpoint is less brave than you think, for it
WHY GROW UP?

demands absolutely nothing but an air of urbanity. Far more courage is needed to acknowledge that both ideals and experience make equal claims on us. Growing up is a matter of respecting those claims and meeting them as best you can, knowing you will never succeed entirely but refusing to succumb to dogma or despair. If you live long enough, each will probably tempt you. Doing what you can to move your part of the world closer to the way that it should be, while never losing sight of the way that it is, is what being a grown-up comes to. If you happen to have a portly uncle who taught you that, you are very lucky.

But enough, for the moment, of reason. There are precious few points of consensus in modern Western philosophy, and one of them is that both reason and experience play a role in most of what you learn. Here again, Kant was decisive. Rationalists like Descartes pointed out the ways in which our senses deceive us, and argued that reason alone could be relied on to tell the truth about the world. Hadn’t physics just discovered that things like colours were merely properties and not part of the essence of matter? Hadn’t mathematics begun to sound the depths of the universe? Empiricists like Locke, by contrast, called the mind a *tabula rasa*, a slate that stays blank until experience writes upon it. Locke’s heir, David Hume, went so far as to call reason impotent. Most philosophers today hold Kant to have ended two centuries of debate by showing that both reason and experience are needed
for knowledge. As he put it, concepts without experience are empty, experience without concepts, blind. Such debates can always be, and have been revived, but it’s interesting to note that most contemporary neuroscience supports the spirit, if not the letter, of Kant’s view. Experiments show that certain experiences actually change the shape of your brain, just as internal mental frameworks are crucial in shaping your experience. The ways in which both reason and experience affect our coming of age will be a theme that runs through this book.

What kinds of experiences are crucial for growing up? To be attuned to the way the world is, you have to have seen something of it. Though philosophers like Blaise Pascal and Lao Tzu thought you could learn all you need to know inside your own room, many have thought travel to be crucial. For example, Kant’s lectures on anthropology tell us that travel is a very good means of learning about human beings, provided one has first got to know one’s own country-folk.

But wait, you may ask. Didn’t you just tell us that he never travelled more than forty miles from Königsberg?

Don’t forget that travel was a different experience in those days. Bumping in a coach over stony excuses for roads. Ears alert for the footfall of bandits and highwaymen. Uncertain inns over weeks and weeks and weeks. And that was just to get from Weimar to Sicily, which was the great journey in the life of Kant’s more adventurous – and more privileged – younger
compatriot Johann Wolfgang Goethe. But even Goethe could only dream of going any further.  

Still, bad roads are a bad excuse, if Kant’s own lectures on anthropology make such an argument for the benefits of travel!  

There is, of course, a difference between theory and practice. That Kant himself felt abashed about his inability to live out his own suggestion is clear from a footnote to the passage on travel – the only unintentionally ad hominem and funny argument I ever found in his works.

A large city, the center of a realm, where the offices of the government are located, that has a university (to cultivate the sciences) and on top of it all has a harbor for sea-trade, which enables traffic not only to the interior of the country but also to neighboring countries with different languages and customs – such a city, as for example Königsberg on the river Pregel, can serve as an appropriate place for extending one’s knowledge of humankind as well as the world, where knowledge can be acquired without traveling. (Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, p. 4)

It sounds like special pleading, but could it be true? There may be some people, in some places, whose minds are so broad and open they need not go far to fill them. Kant might have been such a person, and any of those who are reading these words on one
screen or another might be too. Doesn’t the internet offer more space and time than humankind ever dreamed? If you spend your time in cyberspace watching something besides porn and Korean rap videos, you can gain a great deal. You can read news from hundreds of sources across the world, and learn how differently the same event can be reported. Alas, several recent studies have shown that the internet makes most of us narrower. We read the blogs and the websites that our friends read, limiting our perspective yet further, but the possibilities for expansion are evident. The Arab Spring, whatever its consequences, allowed us to glimpse them, and there’s nothing to be said against an occasional Korean rap video either. Who knew?

But those who have lived, and especially worked, for long enough in another language and in another country than the one they were born into know how much others miss. Even mastery of a language won’t give you the allusions – to the children’s lullabies, for instance, that your new compatriots fell asleep to, and will never entirely get out of their heads. You’ll miss jokes and nuances and much of the irony. (English-speaking Dylan fans will groan at the fact that a German women’s magazine recently named ‘Boots of Spanish Leather’ as the optimal song for long-distance relationships.) Thus travel in places other than cyberspace has often been seen as a crucial step along the path to coming of age. The practice of sending poor men’s
sons off to apprenticeships is now much rarer in Europe than it used to be, but it’s alive and well in places like Tunisia and the Philippines. Wealthier children – who are as likely, these days, to come from Moscow or Beijing as from London or New York – are still sent on one or another version of what the nineteenth century knew as the Grand Tour. In Europe, where the practice is meant to strengthen the political union, it’s called the Erasmus programme; in America it is known as the junior year abroad.

According to some recent studies, the Erasmus programme may not contribute as much to European integration as it’s meant to; many students report coming back with the feeling that their ties to their home countries have been strengthened. But as a step to coming of age it works significantly better than the study abroad programmes of most American colleges, if only because Europeans consider it ill-bred to speak just one language. Former Harvard president Larry Summers recently told the *New York Times* that learning a second language was a waste of time that could better be spent maximizing something quantifiable. Apparently, for such economists as Summers, language is nothing but a means of information gathering. In the United States as in Britain, linguistic competence is seen as a sign of particularly high education, but any Tunisian apprentice knows more languages than Larry Summers. A German secretary may well decide that she liked her holiday in Greece
so much that she wants to learn the language, and take
night courses between her (now annual) trips to Crete.
Do they travel better? Certainly more thoroughly —
and in some ways, more comfortably. Simply moving
from one place to another in the care of a guardian —
be it a college administrator, a distinguished conference
organizer or a high-priced tour operator — contributes
very little to coming of age, and it may even detract
from it by giving us the illusion of having seen the
world without ever having been in it. If you don’t get
your feet wet and your hands dirty you might as well
stay home. You’ll be able to see the Sistine Chapel bet-
ter on the web anyway.

I will argue that the right kind of travel is indeed a
crucial part of reaching maturity, though it is neither
necessary nor sufficient for it. As de Beauvoir noted,
seeing the world is not enough to make you content
with your place in it. Nor need we travel in order to
learn, formally, that different cultures have different
ways. All you have to do is read the Bible to know that
child sacrifice was part of many religions until God
told Abraham he needn’t do it, and what sixteen-year-
old hasn’t heard that the Eskimos let their elderly drift
off on the ice floes? It may be an example that particu-
larly appeals to teenagers, who are happy to use it as a
piece of an argument for ethical relativism. But the
engagement with another culture which real travel
involves heightens our awareness of commonalities
as well as differences. The commonalities as well as
the differences will be subtler than you think, even in the case of cultures that speak (mostly) the same languages. Americans may be as captivated by Downton Abbey as the British are by Lady Gaga, but in the United States things like health care and maternity leave are called benefits, while in Britain, as in most of the civilized world, they are regarded as rights. Those words can make a world of difference in how you view justice and freedom.

As Kant said, it only makes sense to travel in other cultures if you’ve already made some sense of your own – though doing the former will certainly help you with the latter, for it allows you to notice the things in your own culture you once took for granted. When I returned to the States after my first six-year sojourn in Berlin I was outraged every time I opened the New York Times. This wasn’t a matter of the content of its reporting but its form. While German papers print texts, and sometimes photographs illustrating them, the best available American newspaper thinks nothing of using three-quarters of a page for an advertisement and leaving the rest for the news. We do not think about the ways in which this shifts our attention from the slaughter in Bosnia to the sale at Bloomingdale’s, but it does: when we see these spatial relations every morning, which event will seem larger? My attempt to make use of my outrage by weaving the example into the political philosophy classes I was teaching at Yale lasted a few months, maybe a year.
After a time I became so used to the paper again that my reactions to it were no longer visceral. Outrage is enervating, hence hard to retain very long.

This example is, of course, only a small instance of the ways in which we grow into societies that frame our perceptions of the world in ways we barely notice. It may not be an accident that *Peter Pan* was published shortly before the First World War. It would be foolish to say that J. M. Barrie knew what was coming, and A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* gives us a good look at what was going on behind the prettiest of games in what seems to us, nowadays, an innocent world. Still, compared to what came afterwards, the turn of the last century can seem so sweet we might wish time had stopped right there. But forget, if you can, the two world wars and the atom bomb that succeeded it, and consider the mid-century criticisms of Paul Goodman’s classic, *Growing Up Absurd*. Have we created a culture that leaves space for grown-ups, a culture that makes growing up a good option? Goodman argued we have not. He believed that people need to grow into a culture that offers meaningful work, a sense of community and faith that the world is responsive to their efforts. When consuming goods rather than working becomes the focus of our culture, we have created (or acquiesced in) a society of permanent adolescents. Goodman’s work, though enormously influential in the 1960s – Susan Sontag called him the American Sartre – has been largely forgotten, but
much of his critique rings even truer today than it did fifty years ago. Even more can be said of the man whose vision of growing up most inspired Immanuel Kant – the fascinating and maddening Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau’s work is a stinging indictment of the way in which culture merely ‘weaves garlands of flowers around the chains that bind us’. Arts and sciences are more likely to serve our vanity, and our purses, than our common humanity; thus culture warps us into accepting a social order it ought to call into question. The allures of society are so seductive and pervasive that only radical solutions will do. The problems and promise of Rousseau’s *Emile* – philosophy’s only full-length attempt at a manual for coming of age – will be examined later in some detail. I will show how Rousseau and Kant set the terms of discussion, before exploring what makes growing up even harder in the twenty-first century.

Having failed to create societies that our young want to grow into, we idealize the stages of youth. Watching the wide-eyed excitement with which babies face every piece of the world, we envy their openness and naivety, while forgetting the fear and frustration that accompany every bit of progress, from standing upright to drawing a stick-figure. The most pernicious bit of idealization is the very widespread view that the best time of one’s life is the decade between sixteen and twenty-six, when young men’s muscles and young women’s skin are at their most blooming. That’s due
to hormones, and evolutionary biologists will explain that it happens for a reason. But your goal is not to maximize reproduction, whatever may be said of your genes. By describing what is usually the hardest time of one’s life as the best one, we make that time harder for those who are going through it. *(If I’m torn and frightened now, what can I expect of the times of my life that, they all tell me, will only get worse?)* And that is the point. By describing life as a downhill process, we prepare young people to expect – and demand – very little from it.

Few things show this better than the progressive transformation of the Peter Pan story. In the original novel, grown-ups are simply dull: Mr Darling’s knowledge is confined to stocks and shares; his only passion is being exactly like his neighbours. By the mid-twentieth century the character is slightly menacing, an authoritarian who could become a tyrant so easily that the same actor could play father and pirate. By the end of the twentieth century, the grown-up had become ridiculous. In *Hook*, Steven Spielberg’s disturbing twist on the story, Peter Banning is an object of contempt. Grown-ups are still boring and rigid, but they are now so pitiful that teenagers are right to mock them. The variations on the story reflect the decline of the image of adulthood itself. At the beginning of the twentieth century, growing up looked merely dreary; by the end it looked positively pathetic.
WHY GROW UP?

This book will discuss the ways in which our understanding of the way the world is, and the way it should be, are furthered — and hindered — by different kinds of experience. It will argue that being grown-up is itself an ideal: one that is rarely achieved in its entirety, but all the more worth striving for.