CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RATIONALITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FULFILLMENT
IN ADOLESCENTS’ LIVES:
THE PRODUCTION OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
AND SELF-IDENTITY

Essentially all societies place emphasis on how to teach their children to be rational, a process which involves not only an inculcation of knowledge but of what knowledge should be used for, the ability to differentiate between worthwhile and non-worthwhile goals. This of course implicitly makes the assumption that human nature, and particularly emotional needs, are better fulfilled in some ways than others. That societies make the distinction between behavior motivated by “rational” attitudes that serve emotional needs and/or instinctual drives as well as attitudes that can be described as being short-sighted, ignorant, naïve, lazy, foolish, bitterly escapist or even prurient just goes to show that human emotions are recognized as a biological system that orients one to the world, yet requires monitoring by other biological systems, just as there are fail-safe systems in many of the products we buy since error and breakdown are a fact of life.

To discuss what is meant by character in the human context, and how societies develop social fail-safe systems to correct errors in personal psychological functioning, and vice-versa in producing reasons for personal rebellion (since societies themselves can have their own errors so that social and other environmental constraints can mold personalities in unhealthy directions) is what this paper is all about. I also hope in the course of examining these processes to serve as a reminder for works in the social and behavioral sciences and the humanities, that in their time proved highly enlightening, and still do, but just as ignorance or just plain forgetfulness is a factor in individual life, so is it also a factor in social life and in the history of social institutions including fields of knowledge.

To start with, it is perhaps useful to be reminded how personality is molded by environmental constraints, particularly in the younger years. While adults are somewhat more “rational” than children in dealing with environmental constraints, this rationality is more a matter of better ability at developing and sticking with plans to fill their
emotionally-driven purposes. Whether these purposes are themselves rational is a matter of ethics which in everyday life is a matter of concern, as is concern with the mechanisms of personality functioning. As to who will guard the guardians, there is no pat answer but throughout history societies have muddled through, just like we do now.

Ultimately, I hope to shed some light on the reciprocal influences in various kinds of societies with various kinds of structures of social power, and how they inculcate various kinds of cultural values which impinge on young people’s personalities. In return these personalities pressure these societies that they eventually take over to have the kinds of systems of power and of cultural values that they in turn wish to support, or perhaps feel compelled to support, and that they also are comfortable with inculcating in future generations.

To start with, regarding broad questions of social structure and culture, there is an interesting book *The Broken Rebel: A Study in Culture, Politics, and Authoritarian Character* (Wilkinson 1972) that actually summarizes a whole field of study, the attempt to explain why whole societies can collapse into immoral decadence. I am referring of course to the rise of Fascism and Nazism that led to World War II. Wilkinson’s book in fact builds upon probably the most famous book of this genre, a book that tried to explain the prevalence of such attitudes in all societies, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno and others 1950). The major failure of this book as recognized by critics soon after it was published was that the authors stigmatized people they didn’t like for reasons of their own bias, they didn’t like right-wing authoritarians, and didn’t really investigate people who were left-wing authoritarians.

Given that their sampling procedures were all off, it is still interesting to notice what the authors claimed to be weaknesses of character that interfered with proper rationality. This is the what I would call the extreme version of the “authoritarian personality” which is one that combines submissiveness, obvious problems of self-esteem that is probably a direct result of this submissiveness and not just mere coincidence, certain obvious tendencies toward cognitive mistakes that can be described as stereotyping certain classes of socially disfavored people, and two other factors both of which contain attitudinal and motivational elements (which is to say morbid and prurient interests), paranoid judgments of those they consider political and cultural rivals, and absorption in sexual fantasies, often tied in to stereotyping of others, of a definite sado-masochistic sort. As Wilkinson describes such people: “Our detailed description of authoritarianism has so far