Allport Lecture

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Hello, friends. How are you all? Good? Today we're going to talk about Gordon Allport's "Trait Theory." Allport is an important character in the history of personality theory. His definition of personality is the one that is most widely used. He's just an interesting character. Allport is our representative this semester for trait theory. Trait theory has an interesting history to it. Just briefly, let me elaborate. There were trait theories around a hundred years ago or so and the problem with some of the early trait theorists is they believed our personalities were pretty much genetically inherited from our parents. Now, the early trait theorists didn't just believe personalities, they also believed skills and intelligence and whatnot. Early trait theory got all mixed up because some of them were, quite frankly, sexist and racist. Some of the early trait theorists encouraged the government to limit immigration from certain places in the world, at that time it was from Italy and Ireland, because the trait theorists believed that the genetic contribution of those people was less than the ones from Northern Europe. Certainly most of these theorists were men and so they assumed that by virtue of having an XY chromosomal makeup in your 23rd pair as opposed to an XX, males were superior. Hitler was a trait theorist in some ways. Hitler's National Socialism was all about encouraging this kind of super German race. That's why Hitler spent so much time and energy horrifically trying to massacre those he considered not to belong and, of course, we're most aware of the Jewish population in Europe, but also gypsies, gay people, Protestants. Hitler was not discriminating in his attempt to wipe out what he considered were not people with the right traits. So trait theory with its strange bedfellows just kind of got tarred and feathered as this approach that was racist and sexist and so on and so forth.

During, of course, the Twentieth century, we had the civil rights movement, feminism, and a lot of other movements which questioned these racist and sexist ideologies. So trait theory did make a comeback, divorced somewhat from the earlier people that articulated the theory, and that's where Gordon Allport's theory lies. Allport, as far as I have ever read, was not a sexist, a racist, or a Nazi, so his theory really stands for the Trait approach as we go through the semester. Now we have to be . . .

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. . .clear with Allport's definition of traits and this definition goes on and on and I want to just talk it through. As with most psychologists, they have to come up with language that they make up and is obscure so I want to try to explain this. What is a trait? Well, it's generalized and focalized. Let's stop there. By generalized and focalized, what Allport is simply saying is that some traits are very, very broad and they show up in just about all of our behavior. If someone was to describe you as a kind person, that's kind of like a generalized type of trait. You're kind to your friends, you're kind to your parents. You're kind to squirrels. You're kind on the road. You're kind if you're walking down the street if someone asks you for money, and so on. So some traits are very, very broad in general. The opposite of that would be very focalized traits, specific traits which don't have wide application, but have a narrow application. So for instance, if you particularly like eggplant parmigiana, you have the trait of liking eggplant parmigiana when you go to an Italian restaurant. That's a trait which is very specific and particular to the situation of being in an Italian restaurant or making it at home. It's focalized. What I mean by that is it's narrow. So a trait can be either broad or extremely narrow. That's what he means when he says a trait can be generalized and/or focalized. Now, neuropsychic system. Let's pause there. "Psychic" is a word that a lot of these early people used, and fortunately the word has changed somewhat. They used to use the word "psychic" to mean "psychological"; now when we hear the word "psychic," we think of someone who tells you what your future is going to be, or tries to. So "neuropsychic" he's simply saying, is a trait is a physical ("neuro") and psychological. So neuropsychological would be the system. So pretty much traits band together and you have a whole clump of traits, some generalized, some focalized, but they are both physical, neuro and psychological, and in quotes here, "unique to the individual." Yes, you may be very similar to me in that we both prefer eggplant parmigiana and prefer to buy cars that are black, but the total aggregate of all you traits is never going to be the same as anyone else's. We may share a lot of traits with other people, but since we have hundreds and hundreds, in fact *thousands*, of traits, generally speaking when you put all the traits together, we are unique in that even identical twins are not going to have exactly the same trait system. So our definition of traits: "A generalized and focalized neuropsychic system (unique to the individual)…

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. . . with the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent." Well, what does that mean? What Allport's getting at here is let's say I have a trait, a "love somebody" trait, and you have that trait, too – "love somebody"—let's just say that we both love the same person. Now, I have the love person "X trait" and you have the love person "X trait." But the reality is love can be shown in many, many different ways. That's what he means by "to render many stimuli functionally equivalent." How do you know someone loves you? If I asked you how do you know someone loves you? Well, there are so many possible ways we can answer that that are legitimate. "They're there for me." "They give me flowers." "They laugh at my jokes." "They hold me, and hug me, and kiss me." "They do stuff for me." "They remember my birthday." And on and on it goes. Or "they confront me." Or "they tell me when I have spinach on my teeth." Or whatever it is. So what Allport is saying here is that the traits that we have can manifest themselves very, very differently in very, very different ways. The "love somebody" trait doesn't look the same in every relationship and with every person. I love my children and I love my mom but that love looks very, very different. If I had a girlfriend or a wife, presumably that love would look different than the love for my children or the love for my mother trait. So that's what he means that many traits have the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent."

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And finally, traits can render many stimuli functionally equivalent *and* "they can initiate and guide consistent forms of adaptive and expressive behavior." What is he saying here? He's simply saying, quite frankly and straightforwardly, if you have a trait, it shows up in your behavior. If someone says he loves you, but they never spend time with you, they would never talk on the phone with you, they never were kind to you, thoughtful to you, any of the things that we associate with love, you would be right in saying to yourself, "I don't think this person really loves me." So traits can show up a lot of different ways but if you have a trait, it is going to show up in these adaptive and expressive behaviors. If I love chicken parm or eggplant parmigiana, then chances are, if I do get a chance to order it, I'll order it. If I said to you "I love this food," but every single time I was at a restaurant I ordered something else, then I don't know if I love it that much. Relatively speaking, maybe not. So that's Allport's definition of a trait. It can be broad, it can be narrow, it's psychological and physical, it expresses itself in many ways, the collection of all the traits means that we're unique, and, finally, if you have a trait, it will show up at some point in your behavior. Not necessarily like everyone else's behavior, but it will show up.

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Now Allport says, again, we have hundreds, indeed thousands, of different traits, all of us as human beings. He really classifies these as three general types. **Cardinal** traits are the most important ones. He uses the word "cardinal" not just for the red bird, but for the important Catholic official right underneath the pope. So Cardinals are important; there's not thousands of them and, indeed, our cardinal traits, these are the most important traits, these are the ones that define us. If you ask everybody you know to describe you in five words, I suspect what's going to show up in these five words consistently for anyone that really knows you are the cardinal traits, the things that are most pervasive, most dominant, and most important in your huge trait system. At the other end are the **secondary** traits. We have hundreds of these, thousands of these. These are just our preferences, again, I prefer this as opposed to that, I prefer this kind of music to that kind of music, I prefer this tv show over that tv show, I prefer a blue shirt over a white shirt, I prefer eggplant parmigiana over chicken parmigiana. They're the least important. We do have them as traits but we change them; they're actually relatively changeable. Let's say I've been a fan of the Jets as I have for a long period of time, but every year the Jets drive me crazy these last couple years so I say to myself, well, I'm going to become a Pittsburgh Steeler fan. Again, secondary traits don't define me. If you saw me a year from now and I told you I used to be a Jets fan now I'm a Steelers fan, really would you go, "Oh, my goodness, you've completely changed!" No, they're secondary and they're peripheral to us.

The central traits are the ones in the middle. They're important but they're not so important as the cardinal ones but they're more important than the secondary ones. So, cardinal are the biggies dominating defining traits, secondaries are these hundreds, perhaps thousands of preferences for this or that, and the central ones somewhere in-between. So all of us are just a collection of some cardinal, even more central, and then hundreds, indeed, thousands probably of secondary traits.

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The other thing that Allport is very famous for is his stage theory. Most of these psychologists have stage theories: Erikson has his eight stages and Freud has his five stages. Most psychologist personality theorists have a stage theory.

Allport's word for "the self," and again, Freud and Jung use the word "psyche," Adler used the word "creative self" and so on and so forth, Erikson uses the word "ego." Allport's word is the "Proprium," and there are seven stages to this proprium. So remember trait theory says we're born with certain traits. What the stage theory really articulates is we are born with these traits and as they manifest themselves, the environment is going to shape those traits, they're going to shape the way they actually look. We're born with the traits but they can come out in a lot of different ways depending upon our environment. So the proprium is the kind of the slow development of our self. Almost think of a seven layer salad or something like that. So the first layer that we're going to look at would be the bodily self and then the other layers kind of build on top of that first layer. So let's go through these.

In the first 18 months of life, Allport said, our proprium is essentially the bodily self. This is the first and most important stage, if you will, it's the physical self. You may not have thought a lot about this—because I wasn't paying too much attention in the first year and a half of life---but before we're born, we're inside of our mother. We are contained within her body. An umbilical cord feeds us, we don't get hunger pangs and then have to go eat. Once we're born, we slowly, as Allport says, it slowly dawns on us that we are a physical, separate being from any other being, and again, from the one we're inside of, the mother. So the bodily self is the dawning kind of psychological realization that I am a separate physical self from all of the other separate physical selves. I'm not my mother and my mother is not me; I am me, she is her; I'm not my father and so on and so forth. The physical self is just an awareness of our body and it's a kind of an either/or awareness. One kind of awareness is the awareness of "me" versus "not me." So if I could just gross you out a little bit here: right now as you're listening to this, you have saliva in your mouth and I suspect that your saliva doesn't gross you out. You're not sitting there going "oh, yuck, saliva's so disgusting I've got to spit it out," because the saliva in your mouth is defined as "me." But if we were to spit that saliva out into a cup, two or three spitfuls and just let it sit for half an hour, most of us would be pretty disgusted to drink that down. "Why?" Allport asks. Because that saliva has gone from being defined as "me" in my mouth to "not me" once I spit it out of my mouth. Does that make any sense? So the "me/not me" delineation is pretty important. Just as an aside here, one of the things about this bodily self that Allport talks about is when we fall in love with somebody and we engage in behavior like kissing or even sexual intercourse, there's a way, Allport says, in which the bodily self, the me/not me barrier breaks down. I always think of the language of the Bible about marriage, "the two shall become one." And again, in sexual intercourse, obviously the physical picture of that is two bodies, but there's a kind of merging, there's a kind of blurring of the not only psychological barriers but the physical barriers in that sexual intercourse there's a kind of entering into each other's body in a very real way. And that, Allport points out, is kind of the exception to the me/not me category. Can I also point out that we're very careful who we let into the me area. Again, we tend to have pretty intense standards as to people I let close to me. The second stage of the proprium . . .

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. . . also takes place in the 0-18 month but it takes place after the bodily self. The bodily self starts first and then once the bodily self is established, what Allport calls the second stage of the proprium, the second layer of our seven layer of personality salad, and that is self-identity. It's hard to describe self-identity. It's just this internal sense of myself as being the same regardless of where I am, regardless of how I look. I have this sense of I am Stephen whether I just got out of bed and look all sleepy or have taken a shower and gotten in a suit and I'm ready to go somewhere, whether I gain weight or lose weight, whether I shave my hair off or grow it long, whether I have this job or that job, whether I'm going to a rock concert or going to church or driving my car. There is this internal sense that I am me and, again, regardless of how things look, regardless of my political attitudes, my feelings, my beliefs, my successes, my failures, I remain me. I am Stephen Maret, it's me, and that's self-identity. It's the ongoing sense of continuity, sameness, it's the core sense of myself apart from my body which, Allport points out, changes. It gets bigger as I grow and I hit adulthood and then I'm at my peak and slowly my hair turns grey, falls out or whatever, whether I gain weight or lose weight, whatever, sickness comes, sickness goes, I get surgery or tattoos. Bodies look different, bodies change but this internal sense of oneself doesn't and Allport says the second aspect of the proprium is after my sense of my body is self-identity.

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Three is self-esteem. This is the second and third year of life. If you've listen to the lectures on Erikson where we've talked about this sense of mastery and failure and the same ages. Self-esteem for Allport is this early sense that I can accomplish things, and do them, and learn them and by virtue of that, have high self-esteem, or this early sense, this early aspect of myself, which becomes defined as a failure. I may even very young get the message from the world around me or from, sadly, my parents, "you're a loser, you'll amount to nothing in life, why can't you be like your sister or your brother, you're not big enough, you're not pretty enough, you're not this enough, you're not that enough…" This early

sense of failure which Allport says is so key for the rest of life. So that's the third stage, the sense of self-esteem, which is our third layer to this psychology salad.

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The fourth and fifth stages happen in the four to six age range. The first of these is what Allport calls "self-extension" which he says is when he says we begin to extend our self to the world around us. Let me just talk a little bit about this. A big part of the way in which we define ourselves, and remember at the beginning of the semester when I was talking about relationality in that our personality as Kierkegaard mentioned it is a function of our relationships. Well, this is what Allport is talking about here. Early on in life, kindergarten to first grade, Allport is simply saying that we begin to latch on, as part of our identity, to the material world. "I'm from this town." "I go to this church." "I'm a Yankee fan." "I play soccer." "I go to Saltbrook School or whatever it is." In other words, that part of, by definition now, I begin to incorporate the world and also I begin to define self but also not just see myself as part of groups, but define myself as members of these groups. Now some of these groups obviously will change—"I'm in second grade, next year I'll be in third grade. And I'll go to a different school when I'm in high school." --so some of these identities, the self-extension, change but it really is Allport's notion that our proprium is at least partly a function of the groups, of the larger material world out there and the way we use it to both define it and prop up ourselves. That's self-extension. The other aspect of this is

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in the range for four to six range is "self-image" which for Allport has two aspects to it. It's my image of myself that I have, the expectations of myself that I have of myself for me, but we'd be naïve to ignore the fact, as Allport doesn't, that other people's expectations of me also influence my expectations of me. I clearly get these expectations. My parents tell me all kinds of expectations that they have. "We expect you to be polite. We expect you to tell the truth. We expect you to not use that language around your grandmother." And stuff like that. We are bombarded with expectations in life, and they don't always align with our own expectations. So some image is really two-fold, others overlap here between others' expectations and my expectations of myself; but certainly, I'll confess to you, a lot of times when adults had expectations of me, I pretty much lived up to them when they were around, but clearly when the adults weren't around, I say, "nah, I'm not going to be that way, I'm going to do it my way." So, expectations don't always align, although for most of us there is somewhat an overlap.

Now the last two stages are kind of . . .

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. . . interesting. Stage six parallels, again, Freud's latency stage at six to twelve, and it's got an interesting name. Allport called it "the self as rational coper." It's a little odd. But what Allport is simply saying here is that at this part of the proprium, children are old enough now to begin stepping outside of themselves and asking themselves questions: "how am I going to come across? Am I cool? Nerdy? Drama king or queen?" In other words, we begin to have enough awareness of ourselves to begin to shape and create ourselves so that we get better press from our teachers, from our friends particularly, because we realize that if I'm thought of as cool by my friends that I'm more likely to have more friends. We begin thinking to ourselves well maybe I shouldn't be who I really am, I should try to be a little bit more like people expect me to be because then I'll get more praise and honor and what not. So it's kind of like the reflective self, I get to look back and see, it's almost like I look in the mirror and I can see myself coming across and I don't like it. Allport, in one of his books, talks about how up until age six, children are not very good liars but one of the things in shaping our projection of ourselves on the world is we realize "it may be beneficial to me to be a little deceitful here in certain situations because if I tell the truth, I'm going to get blowback from it." So to lie well, one must almost step outside of oneself and be convincing. So the self as rational coper is this part of us which judges how we're coming across and makes adjustments.

Finally the last …

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. . . stage in the proprium is "propriate striving." This is simply Allport's way of saying this part of the self begins to learn and consider that there is a time when you put off immediate gratification, which is not really something that children are good at, because there is a larger, long-term good. This about your studying. I suspect none of you look forward to sitting down and studying for tests, writing papers, and so on and so forth. You're never going to be a successful student unless

you can engage in some appropriate striving. In other words, put off the immediate stuff you want to do, and for me this afternoon as I make these slides (it may be disappointing to you but there is other stuff I'd rather be doing than talking to myself, sitting in my office making up this lecture), I would be watching the baseball playoffs, football, and college football, whatever. But we learn that "boy, I'd really like to do this now but you know, I can't do that because it will feel good for ten minutes but then I won't get stuff done I need to and then I'll be all stressed out because everything will be late." That's propriate striving: the ability to make decisions as to what is good for the long term as opposed to, as most children are, having difficulty to put off the short-term. I have two children, an older daughter and a younger son and on Saturdays I gave the kids their allowance. So from very early on, I don't know what it was but my daughter, when she got her allowance, she almost never spent it, she would always save it. I asked her one time, "Why don't you spend your allowance," and she goes, "Well, Dad, you gave me a buck (or two bucks for five, whatever it was) but there's not really too much good you can buy with that so I'm going to save it up until I get fifty bucks and then buy something really good. And, of course, I commended her for that. My son was exactly the opposite. So on Saturday when I gave him his buck, or two bucks, or five bucks, he was after me. "Can we go to the comic book store? Can we go to the store?" He wanted to spend it right away and I tried to point out to him many times, "Listen, Brandon, why don't you save it for a couple of weeks and then you'll be able to buy some cool stuff?" And he'd say, "No, no, I just want to go spend it."
And that's what he did every week until he got to be a lot older. My daughter seemed to do that when she was five. So that's just an example of propriate striving: it's better to put off spending my money right now so that I can save it up, and, again, long-term, I'll be able to get something big and cool, but I've got to wait in order to save up for it. So that's Allport's theory of the proprium. Now a couple other concepts…

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A strong aspect to Allport's theory is this idea of functional autonomy. Let's just read this and then I'll try and talk it through and explain it. Functional autonomy is "A given activity or form of behavior may become an end or goal in itself in spite of the fact that it was originally engaged in for some other reason." How are we ever going to learn to strive appropriately if children are basically governed by immediate gratification, and to grow up and mature, according to Allport, and it is, is that I need to put aside immediate gratification and really need to think of a larger, bigger, more long-term picture. How, Allport says, does that ever happen through functional autonomy? What functional autonomy simply is is if you're anything like me, you grew up anything like me in a family, a household, in my case, mostly boarding schools, and teachers and parents have all kinds of rules about what you have to do. You have to be a role-model, and you have to eat politely, and you have to eat your vegetable before you get dessert, and you have to take a shower or bath every day, you have to, you have to, you have to. The idea is most children do that "have to" not because they think it's important or valuable, but rather because they are made to. They engage in a behavior for some other reason than they see it as valuable. So eating vegetables, washing, doing your homework, and learning manners and all kinds of things—most children don't see the value in these things in and of themselves, and it's the hope of most parents that if they make their children do something, sooner or later the child will see for themselves that "wow, I should do this because it's to my benefit." Again, I'm sure you've been doing homework for years and years and years. Now that you're in college, not one has to make you do your homework; you've gradually, even though you've started off doing this homework, let's say your homework is a given activity or form of behavior, even though you start off by being forced by your parents or teachers or whatever, now most of us have seen that it's to our benefit. We've learned to propriately strive even though you did homework for non propriate reasons we've learned. If I can just give you an example, in my family when my kids were younger, I had a rule that they had to go to church every Sunday. We went to a Presbyterian church in New Providence so they had to go. Every Sunday. They weren't always happy about it and a fair amount of Sundays there was complaining about it but I said to them, until you leave this house, you have to go to church. My hope and goal was by forcing them to go to church, eventually, it was just because of my religious and spiritual beliefs, I was hoping eventually they would see the value of gathering with a group of like-minded people and worshipping God and singing and so on and so forth, stuff that happens in church. And I was hoping that when they went away to college, they would go to church on their own. I don't know how successful that is, they do go once in a while but certainly not as regularly as I forced them to. That's an another example of function autonomy: sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. So that's how we really mature, according to Allport.

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One other concept, and we were talking before in our definition of traits that traits have this capacity to make a variety of stimuli functionally equivalent. In other words, a trait can show up in many, many different ways. The "I love you" trait can show up by giving you flowers, by saying I love you, by washing all the clothes, by holding and hugging and listening, and any number of other things. But pluralisticity is the opposite of that, and that is simply that a particular behavior, quite frankly, can have multiple traits that cause that. So if you were to observe someone giving flowers, you

might say “wow, that person’s giving flowers. They love the person.” But hold on a second. There’s a lot of reasons to give someone flowers other than you love them, right? There could be multiple traits behind the particular act of giving flowers. I may realize this person is mad at me and in an effort to make sure or hope they are less mad at me than they appear to be, I give flowers. Or I may not like this person and in the flowers I put some kind of smell that I know they’re allergic to and I’m giving flowers to harm them. That’s kind of ridiculous but you get my point. Pluralisticity says that while traits can show up in a lot of behaviors, any one behavior can be motivated by multiple different traits. I remember trying to teach my children that just because an adult is kind doesn’t mean that they’re trustworthy. Again, good parents have to teach their children to be wary of adults because adults can harm yo,u and children almost have to unlearn this idea that seems implicit that kind people are kind, that people that act kind have your interest in mind. No, and I remember trying to tell my kids, sometimes kind people are actually the ones that want to hurt you the most. So if you don’t know these people, even if they’re being kind, still run away. That’s the idea here, that the behavior of kindness could #1) could indicate a trait of kindness but #2) it could also indicate a trait of someone who wants to abuse and kidnap, a pedophile or something like that.

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Finally, we’re almost done here with Allport here so hang in there, Allport talks about, and we’ll end here today by talking about, his six characteristics by what he called mature people. These are straightforward but I just thought we’d whip through them. First of all if you’re mature, Allport says, you have a realistic view of reality. You’re not delusional, you, not perfectly, but you kind of see things as they actually are and you don’t need to force things to be different than they actually are. You’ve embraced the truth about the world. And even if it’s inconvenient or you don’t like it, you still have a realistic perception of reality.

Secondly, you have a basic sense of accepting yourself, not that you think you’re perfect, not that you don’t think there’s room for improvement, but you have a basic sense of “I’m me and I’m okay, and I’ll work on my flaws and I have a basic sense of self.”

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Number 3, extension of the sense of self. Mature people are giving people, they don’t isolate, and they don’t stick to themselves exclusively. By extending myself to the world, Allport says that mature people have a sense that they belong in this kind of larger, interactive groups that we belong to. And extension of the sense of self is also accepting my responsibilities. If I’m in X, Y and Z group, part of being in that group means that I need to do this, need to do this, and need to do that. And along with that Number 4, a warm sense of relatedness to others. My ability to interact with other people is warm, I’m easy to connect with, I’m not prickly, I’m not angry, I’m not always ragging on people to do this and this and that. There’s a warmth to my relationship.

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Number 5 goes along with number 1. If I have a realistic view of reality, again #5 is I have a realistic view of myself, I can objectify myself in the best sense of the word. I don’t need to always justify myself; I don’t need to be self-defensive. I kind of step up for myself and say, “You know, Stephen, you’re a little bit this way, a little bit that way, and if somebody calls me on it, I don’t deny it. I say, yeah, you’re right. Maybe I do have a temper. Or maybe I am a little bit of a drama king or something like that. Maybe I am a little needy.” So 1 and 5 go along.

And lastly, Allport says that mature people have thought about their life long enough that they come up with some philosophy that unifies life for them. Allport does mention that this unifying philosophy of life is often a religious philosophy, sometimes a philosophical one, a political one. But immature people are just kind of like pinballs in the big machine of life in that they just kind of bounce around, there’s no reason or rhyme to why they do things. When you have a unifying philosophy of life, you have some kind of underlying principles that guide your decisions: “this is who I am, and these are my principles so I’m not going to do that and I *am* going to do that because this is who I am, kind of thing. “So he simply says that mature people have a unifying philosophy of life, whatever it is.

That’s Allport’s theory and of course, you can read about it in the textbook. I hope it was interesting to you.