# Gilbert Harman

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Gilbert (Gil) Harman was born in 1938, and grew up in a family of five outside Philadelphia. After graduating from Swarthmore College in 1960, he received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1964, writing a dissertation under the supervision of W.V.O. Quine. He began his career at Princeton in 1963 as instructor and became assistant professor a year later. He rose rapidly through the ranks, becoming associate professor in 1969, and full professor in 1972. When he retired in 2017, he was the James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy. His long association with and loyalty to the Department of Philosophy and the University have greatly contributed to the reputation of philosophy at Princeton.

Gil has worked in virtually every area of systematic philosophy—philosophy of language and linguistics, epistemology, philosophy of mind and cognitive science, and moral philosophy—and he has made major contributions in each of these areas. His earliest publications were in Chomsky-style generative linguistics, a field in which he continued to publish throughout his career, but he moved very quickly into the philosophy of language and wrote a number of foundational papers on syntax, semantics, the theory of meaning, and the theory of understanding. In this connection, he teamed up with Donald Davidson to edit *Semantics of Natural Language*, a collection of seminal papers in the field that gave rise to the modern philosophy of language as we know it. Gil continued to publish in the philosophy of language throughout his career. Indeed, he thinks that there is no hard and fast distinction between the contributions he has made in linguistics and philosophy of language and those he has made elsewhere in philosophy.

At the same time that Gil was working on linguistics and the philosophy of language, he was also working on related issues in how we think about the world, including themes that cross the boundaries between epistemology, philosophy of psychology, and, more recently, cognitive science. In epistemology, Gil is perhaps best known for having articulated and defended the idea that inductive reasoning can best be understood as inference to the best explanation. His first book,

*Thought*, has become a genuine classic. It is widely cited and selections are frequently reprinted. The concern with how we think about the world weaves its way through Gil's extensive publication list, through countless journal articles and in two subsequent books, *Change in View: Principles of Reasoning* and *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind*.

More recently, Gil's attention has turned toward the ways in which we might approach these issues through cognitive science. In addition to numerous articles, he has co-authored two books with Princeton's Dean of Faculty and the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Electrical Engineering Sanjeev Kulkarni: *Reliable Reasoning: Induction and Statistical Learning Theory* and *An Elementary Introduction to Statistical Learning Theory*.

Gil has played a major role in building bridges between philosophy and the cognitive sciences at Princeton and beyond, and in convincing philosophers of the importance of cognitive science for understanding reasoning and the mind.

Gil is also a major figure in moral philosophy. In addition to his many articles, he has published three books. *The Nature of Morality* has been widely translated and excerpted. Several generations of graduate students earned their doctoral dissertations by grappling with a key problem for moral realism—the explanatory impotence of moral facts—that Gil famously put forward in that book. He published a spirited defense of moral relativism in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, a back and forth on the topic with Judith Jarvis Thomson. Though moral relativism is still a minority view within the philosophical community, it is given its most widely respected defense in Gil's work. He also published a collection of his seminal papers on this and other topics in moral philosophy, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*.

Gil taught a wide variety of courses for the philosophy department at every level, from 200-level courses for beginning students to advanced graduate seminars. His courses included core areas of philosophy—including epistemology, philosophy of mind and psychology, and moral philosophy—but also courses cross-listed in linguistics, psychology, and even electrical engineering. He also supervised the work of numerous students, undergraduate and graduate. His popularity as a dissertation adviser led to his having supervised one in every seven of the graduate students in philosophy while he taught at Princeton. These students have gone on to teach

philosophy at major universities all over the English-speaking world. In 2013, the department brought back several of these students and Gil's former colleagues to campus for a conference to celebrate his 50 years of teaching at Princeton.

Within the department, Gil was the director of graduate studies for at least 15 years—no one can remember when exactly he began— in which role he seemed effortlessly to recruit the very best students, and to keep the program running smoothly and efficiently. He was also co-director with George Miller of the Princeton University Cognitive Science Laboratory from 1985 to 1995, and chair of the Program in Cognitive Studies from 1991 to 1998 and of the Committee on Cognitive Studies from 1998 to 2005. Beyond the department, he and Stephen Stich, professor of philosophy at Rutgers University, convened an annual meeting of philosophers with an interest in problems that lie at the intersection of moral philosophy and psychology. The collaborative work done by the members of this group fostered the new field of experimental philosophy—that is, philosophy done by using empirical methods. Of course, Gil thinks that all philosophy is experimental in this sense, as the only methods by which we get knowledge are empirical methods.

This last remark calls to mind an important feature of Gil's intellectual temperament. He likes taking arresting and unpopular ideas and seeing where they lead. As a result, there is a freshness and liveliness that makes everything he has written fun to read. One of the strongest and best-known figures in the larger philosophical community, his standing in the field was recognized by his election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2005, and in that same year he was awarded the Jean Nicod Prize in Paris, where he delivered the prestigious Jean Nicod Lectures. In 2009, Princeton honored him with the Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities. In typical fashion, Gil used the occasion of the Behrman Award dinner to lobby the University to build a Program in Linguistics. By any measure, his has been a truly spectacular career. He will be much missed.