Une lettre de Martin Orans
À propos du compte rendu, par Denis Monnerie, du livre de Martin Orans, Not Even Wrong : Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Samoans, paru dans L’Homme 143, juil.-sept. 1997, pp. 219-220, l’auteur nous demandés de publier cette réponse :

I am grateful to M. Monnerie, as an author should be, for a succinct yet accurate account of the contents of my book. As « explication de texte » the review is generally also accurate and thoughtful*.

Regarding the limitation of Mead’s proficiency in Samoan the reviewer criticizes me for not having taken account of the limitations imposed by the unavailability of linguistic work at that time. On this small point he has mistaken my purpose. I made no judgment regarding the relative linguistic facility of Mead; I merely ascertained what her understanding was. Therefore there was no reason to exculpate her by pointing out that contemporary linguistic works make learning the language easier. Freeman had argued that Mead’s limited understanding of Samoan may have contributed to certain errors which he alleges she made. Having the field materials at hand I confirmed Freeman’s claim that her understanding was limited. However, as I noted, this did not substantially contribute to any misunderstanding because, contrary to her claims, most of the data regarding adolescents was obtained in English from English speaking informants, both adolescent and adult.

On the most important issue in my book regarding the requirements of science, the reviewer offers his sharpest criticism suggesting that the arguments in this domain are poor and hardly convincing. It is his view that this weakness arises from my tendency to rely on an exclusively physicist’s conception of science which he regards as inapplicable to the study of behavior. What I take to be the hallmark of science is the production of propositions which are, in principle, verifiable; by this I mean propositions sufficiently clear so that one may judge what observations are consistent and what observations are not consistent with the propositions. I think that the reviewer will find that this view is by no means confined to physics.

* Under the title of the review is noted an appendix with : « (extraits des notes de terrain de M. Mead) » ; it should be read : « (extraits de Coming of Age in Samoa et de matériaux de terrain) ». 
I am not surprised at his harsh judgment of my point of view for as I say in the book, « my analysis is based on a perspective very different from what is currently fashionable in anthropology » (p. 10) and few « accept the ordinary scientific requirement that propositions must in principle be verifiable and should be accepted or rejected by consideration of their fit with observations » (ibid.). Since the reviewer concludes with the thought that my work may stimulate deeper and more innovating reflection I hope that he and those with his point of view as well as less opinionated novices will engage in this deeper reflection. I would offer as a small contribution to this reflection that they consider how one is to know what a proposition means if not by knowing what observations are consistent or not with it? I see no reason why this does not apply to propositions about human behavior. Regarding Mead's claim that adolescents in the U.S. suffered more stress than Samoan adolescents (circa 1920s), how are we to know what is meant without a definition of stress which allows comparison? Without such a definition Mead's claim is, as I say, « not even wrong »!

On a lighter note, I must say that I found the reviewer's comment that my work was « more nuanced than Freeman » quite amusing. I believe that is like saying that one is less perverse than the Marquis de Sade. I do not know if the reviewer meant to be so witty, but in any case I appreciated the remark.

Martin Orans