

## The virgin birth debate and testimony

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* Various tribes deny that pregnancy is caused by sexual relations. Is this irrational? I present a puzzle involving testimony which some tribes might once have faced.

*Draft version:* Version 3 (26<sup>th</sup> July 2022, “I wish...”).

*It's always a virgin birth*

*In the house of mirth.*

What causes pregnancy? The traditional answer would seem to be sexual intercourse between a male and a female. But how traditional is it? The Bible includes a notable exception. And various tribes, we are told (e.g. Powell et al. 1968), deny this causal role to sexual relations, even in normal circumstances.

Is this denial irrational or at least unscientific? That is actually the question I wish to look into. To begin with, there is no constant conjunction between such intercourse and pregnancy. Sometimes pregnancy does not result. Should that lead observers to conclude that such a relation is at least necessary, though not sufficient? It seems to me that one can run into a problem with maintaining that it is necessary, which is different from underdeterminism (and does not involve remarkable transfers of semen, which I shall set aside<sup>1</sup>):

- (a) Sexual intercourse between a male and a female is necessary for pregnancy.

---

<sup>1</sup> I have not done research on this, but I recall hearing about the possibility and don't know enough to assess it.

- (b) Someone in one's tribe is pregnant but denies having sexual relations with anyone.
- (c) Other tribe members have no grounds for rejecting her denial without assuming the theory that sexual intercourse is necessary for pregnancy.
- (d) Given the data available to them, it is unscientific to simply assume this theory when faced with testimony to the contrary.

Imagine some tribe members who respond to this set of propositions by giving up on (a) or demanding that the most skilled scientists in the tribe give up on (a).

This problem here is not underdeterminism: the thesis that there are always multiple scientific theories that fit with the evidence (see Quine 1951). People are claiming that it is unscientific to persist in holding (a), rather than that there are two scientifically acceptable responses, only one of which involves holding onto this belief. We can assume that underdeterminism is false and the problematic combination of propositions remains.

We can at least imagine a tribe which favours getting rid of (a). "She says that she did not have sexual relations. We are going to have to accept that." What is the next step? Withdrawing to "Sexual intercourse between a male and a female is normally necessary for pregnancy"; or more revolutionary replacements for (a)?

### References

- Powell, H.A., Dixon, R.M.W., Burridge, K.O.L., Leach, E., and Spiro, M.E. 1968. Virgin Birth. *Man* 3 (4): 651-656.
- Quine, W.V. 1951. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20-43.