

# Pessimism and science do not wed

by Louise Ghandhi

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## In Praise of Imperfection: My Life and Work

by Rita Levi-Montalcini  
Basic Books Inc., New York, 1988  
220 pages hardbound, \$18.95

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Enthusiasm was my first reaction to this book; it could have been a real contribution to cultural and scientific optimism, had the author not fallen into cynicism. Science and pessimism do not wed, and so the failure of Rita Levi-Montalcini.

The enjoyable part of this book is the excitement of discovery. Step by step, the long and arduous process leading to the causes of nerve cell growth is retraced for the reader, who can't help but be moved each time Levi-Montalcini is "filled with joy" because a new breakthrough has been made. In 1986, she became the seventh woman to win a Nobel Prize in the sciences. Her discovery of nerve growth factor led to other breakthroughs in neurobiology and opened up promising prospects in the understanding of many diseases.

So far, so good. However, Rita Levi-Montalcini's "science" is ridden with flaws typical of today's anti-science crowd, as the last chapter of the book, "Disharmony in a Complex System," reveals in a pointed way. There, she states that after having spent her life investigating the development of the nervous system, she now wants to unravel the mystery of its function. A discussion of evolution follows: The author, a Darwinian, has a mechanistic approach that leaves out actual negentropic processes. She points out that the cortical areas of the brain associated with higher cognitive functions have evolved significantly in humans, whereas the subcortical nuclei associated with emotive activity are not substantially different than that of lower animals or early man.

From this fact, she concludes: "The vertiginous growth of the constructive and destructive powers of *Homo sapiens*—in striking contrast with the invariability of human emotive faculties, which, today as in the past, control conduct and actions—is the prime cause of the dangers that threaten the very survival of our species."

### Creative reason denied

The "most decisive influence on the course of my life," she attributes to her father and recalls how he taught her the sentence, *Io sono una libera pensatrice* ("I am a free-thinker") when she was but three years old. Of scientific research,

she writes that the essential factors are "neither the degree of one's intelligence nor the ability to carry out one's tasks with thoroughness and precision . . . more important are total dedication and a tendency to underestimate difficulties." Levi-Montalcini had this total dedication when, during the Nazi occupation of Italy, being Jewish did not stop her from doing research in an improvised laboratory hidden in her bedroom.

Yet Levi-Montalcini fails to distinguish between man and beast. Man is *imago viva Dei*, the living image of God, by his unique capacity to reason. No animal can do this. This constant process of perfection is uniquely human and deserves to be praised, not man's "imperfection." The difficulty for our "free-thinking" author in understanding the preceding statement is that Rita Levi-Montalcini views the rational capacity and the emotional capacity of man as two competing poles, where the emotional is equated with the irrational (a common occurrence among feminists): "a species well endowed with higher cognitive abilities, yet, in its conduct tragically governed by the dominant emotional ones." In fact, creativity cannot exist without emotion, and man is uniquely capable of the noblest emotion, that of *agapē*, a Greek term meaning love of God, love of humanity, love of beauty. This quality of love, which animals do not possess, must be taken into account in the study of the physiological aspect of the human mind.

So, it is no surprise to learn, from reliable sources in Rome, that Rita Levi-Montalcini is a notorious malthusian advocate, promoting the reduction of the world's population—i.e., genocide. And thus the tragedy fully unfolds: This scientist, whose work it is to understand life, shows that she has no understanding of it; and this so-called opponent of fascism, as she repeatedly portrays herself to be, shows no understanding of fascism, the root of which is a disdain for human life.

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