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Lessons from the ant world

By Christian Science Monitor, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.25.19

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Image 1. Matabele ants treat the wounds of other ants. These ants hunt for termites but sometimes they get hurt when termites fight back. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

The Matabele ant is named after a group of African warriors. It is known for being a fierce fighter, but the ant also has a caring side.

Scientists found out that Matabele ants take care of each other when they get hurt. Not many animals do this. The only other animals that have been discovered so far are humans and some other primates like monkeys and apes. In other words, ants and humans both care for others in need.

The helping behavior goes against a concept. It is known as natural selection. The basic idea is that selfish behavior helps with survival.

How Animals Work Together

Frans de Waal is a scientist. He has written many books about morality among humans and other primates. Morality is what helps us choose between right and wrong. Many scientists thought selfishness is a key part evolution in the 1960s and 1970s. De Waal didn't like this.

In the 1990s, that view began to change. Scientists started looking more closely how animals, such as humans, work together. "If you bring people together, the first thing they want to do is cooperate and be nice," de Waal said. Now there are studies that show that many mammals are a bit like that, he said. They want to help," he said.

Studies show that a baby who is one years old will try to help a stranger in need. Many other mammals do the same, even when there is no reward.

How Ants Help Each Other

Since people are social animals and like to ask deep questions, we think that helping others has to do with morality. But ants show that animals can help without morality, said Erik Frank. He is a scientist who studies ants.

When a Matabele ant gets hurt, it gives off a chemical known as a pheromone. The chemical tells nearby ants to come help the ant that got hurt. The injured ant is carried back to the nest, where other ants treat its wounds. Without this treatment, most injured ants die within 24 hours. But almost all of the injured ants who get treatment survive. Frank said this shows how "very simple cues can lead to these very complex behaviors."



An Instinct to Help?

Unlike ants, humans use empathy. This is the ability to imagine how another person is feeling. Scientists see empathy in humans and other animals as a kind selfless concern for others.

De Waal pointed out that it is common for primates to clean each other's injuries. Many other animals show signs of empathy, too.

Yet this type of behavior could not have evolved if it wasn't also good for the helper in one way or another. In other words, when animals can count on each other, it is easier for all of them to survive.