



People Ain't Ants

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I found a LinkedIn video post highlighting the teamwork and cooperation exhibited in ant collective foraging behavior.

Two pieces of bait were placed at the bottom of an otherwise empty round paper food container. Its size appeared to be in the 64 oz. range. The ants were tiny compared to the bait, and the bait is tiny compared to the container, but its white interior made the ant foraging behavior easily observed as the ants began to swarm around the bait.

Upon its initial discovery, more and more ants arrived at the bait site. There was a long, chaotic period as the swarming ants pushed the bait in circles at the bottom of the container, attempting to find an easy exit. Finally, they slowly lift the bait along the container's inside surface, over its lip, and down the other side, ultimately carrying their now-freed prize to their nearby nest.

The purpose of this elaborately presented video and the text that supports it appears to be a testimonial on the positive outcomes of teamwork used to achieve a commonly held goal. However, teamwork can only be judged by the outcomes it produces. It is neither good nor bad; it is simply functional or dysfunctional.

I use these two terms as they specifically relate to analyzing a conflict between two or more participants.

Functional conflict refers to healthy disagreement that can result in positive outcomes. It typically arises from diverse perspectives, open communication, active problem-solving, and positive participant relationships.

In contrast, dysfunctional conflict is characterized by negative interactions that can escalate tensions and lead to harmful consequences.

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Dysfunctional conflict often involves personal attacks, poor or nonexistent communication, the stagnation or escalation of unresolved issues, and strained or damaging relationships.

Watching cooperative behavior, teamwork, and problem-solving in ants is fascinating stuff. Still, before we get too enthusiastic about the benefits of ant-inspired behavior, we must consider its costs as a possible model for human conduct. Humans are not ants, and it is essential to understand why human behavior mimicking ant behavior is neither feasible nor desirable.

Cognitive Complexity and Decision-Making

Ants rely on instinctual behaviors shaped by evolutionary adaptations, while humans possess cognitive complexity that enables advanced reasoning, self-reflection, and moral judgment. These differences significantly influence how each species approaches decision-making and social interactions.

Ants communicate through pheromones and instinctual responses, making collective decisions without individual agency. Their social structure is hierarchical, with roles dictated by the colony's needs. For example, foraging ants lay down pheromone trails to guide others to food sources. This decentralized decision-making emerges from individual actions responding to environmental cues, working well in stable situations but lacking the nuanced deliberation of human decision-making.

Human decision-making is—not unsurprisingly—more complex.

While pheromones may influence human behavior, their exact impact on decision-making is still under scientific scrutiny. We like to think of ourselves as logical creatures. However, psychological research has shown that human decision-making is rarely purely rational. Instead, it is influenced by emotions, biases, and cognitive shortcuts (known as heuristics), which can sometimes lead to suboptimal or irrational choices.

This tendency to prioritize immediate responses over careful deliberation is rooted in our evolutionary development. Quick, emotional, or instinctive reactions would have been more advantageous for survival than pausing to consider every possible scenario in moments of potential danger. This is the well-known, instinctive "fight, flight, or freeze" response that all vertebrates possess.

Traditional decision-making activities involve a mix of logic, experience, instinct, and intuition, with trial and error playing a significant role in refining learned skills. This learning process often takes a great deal of time and effort.

Implications for Social Organization

The differences in decision-making between ants and humans have significant implications for social organization. Ants thrive in structured environments that minimize individual input, whereas human societies flourish when diverse perspectives are embraced, allowing individuals to express their ideas and aspirations.

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Recognizing individual agency is crucial for fostering creativity and innovation. Unlike ants, where the colony's survival often precedes individual needs, human well-being relies on balancing personal fulfillment with collective goals. Treating humans as mere system components undermines this essential aspect of human existence.

Additionally, the emotional and social lives of ants and humans differ markedly. Ants exhibit behaviors driven primarily by survival instincts, while humans experience complex emotions that shape their relationships and motivations. Ant societies are organized around functional roles—workers, soldiers, and queens—where cooperation is instinctual rather than emotional.

In contrast, human relationships are deeply influenced by emotions like love and empathy, fostering strong social bonds essential for effective communication and collaboration. This emotional depth allows individuals to forge meaningful connections that enhance well-being and promote social cohesion.

Empathy is pivotal in human interactions, facilitating mutual understanding and prosocial behaviors crucial for building strong communities. Unlike ants, whose cooperation is based on survival, human collaboration often arises from shared values.

Cultural complexity further distinguishes humans from ants. While biological imperatives largely govern ant behavior, human societies are shaped by culture, history, and diverse value systems. Humans create intricate beliefs and practices that influence behaviors and interactions, enabling societies to innovate and address complex challenges. Cultural differences significantly shape human behavior and social interactions, underscoring the richness of human emotional life and the potential for collective growth.

The Consequences of Treating Humans Like Ants

Attempting to apply ant-like principles to human societies can lead to detrimental consequences that undermine the richness of human experience. One significant risk is the potential loss of individual agency. Societies may overlook the importance of personal aspirations, creativity, and self-expression by prioritizing efficiency and functional roles. This oversight can lead to disenfranchisement and disconnection, ultimately stifling innovation and progress.

Treating humans as mere components of a more extensive system can erode the social bonds essential for community cohesion. The richness of human relationships, built on emotional connections and shared values, is crucial for fostering resilience and support during challenging times. Focusing on functional roles risks reducing individuals to cogs in a machine, undermining the sense of belonging and purpose vital for human well-being.

Ethically, treating humans like ants raises significant social justice and equity issues. A rigid focus on efficiency may prioritize certain groups or interests over others, leading to systemic inequalities and marginalization. Human societies must navigate complex moral landscapes, balancing individual rights with collective responsibilities. Ignoring these nuances can exacerbate social tensions and hinder efforts toward justice and equity.

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Conclusion

Exploring ants' cooperative behavior and its relevance to human societies reveals that while ant colonies demonstrate impressive efficiency, they highlight fundamental differences between them. Ants operate primarily on instinct within a rigid hierarchy, prioritizing survival at the cost of individual agency and emotional complexity—traits central to the human experience.

Humans possess cognitive complexity that allows nuanced decision-making, empathy, and cultural evolution. Our cooperation is influenced by emotions, social contexts, and individual aspirations rooted in shared values and emotional connections. This depth fosters innovation and belonging, which is essential for personal and societal well-being.

However, not all shared goals are positive; history reveals the dangers of dysfunctional problem-solving and cruel collective behavior, from lynchings to state-sponsored atrocities such as genocide and ethnic cleansing. Imposing ant-like principles on human societies risks undermining creativity and social cohesion, leading to disenfranchisement and systemic inequalities.

Conflict resolution and cooperation require hard work, pursued and developed by knowledgeable individuals, one conflict at a time, one group at a time, and one individual at a time. They also require a solid understanding of the human condition. What worked well in one set of circumstances may not work in another. The resolution of conflict requires discovering the right questions to ask, validating the responses, if need be, asking the question in a different should circumstances require it, and not making any assumptions about what it will take to resolve it.

Conflict resolution and cooperation cannot be found in draconian adherence to Humanity's worst inclinations or our most fanciful delusions but by discovering what conflicting individuals and groups value sufficiently to consider conditionally reaching out to their counterparts.

It's a lot more complicated than observing ants' swarming behavior and then implying that it can be used as an analogy for positive human cooperation.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:

https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/people_ain't_ants.pdf

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