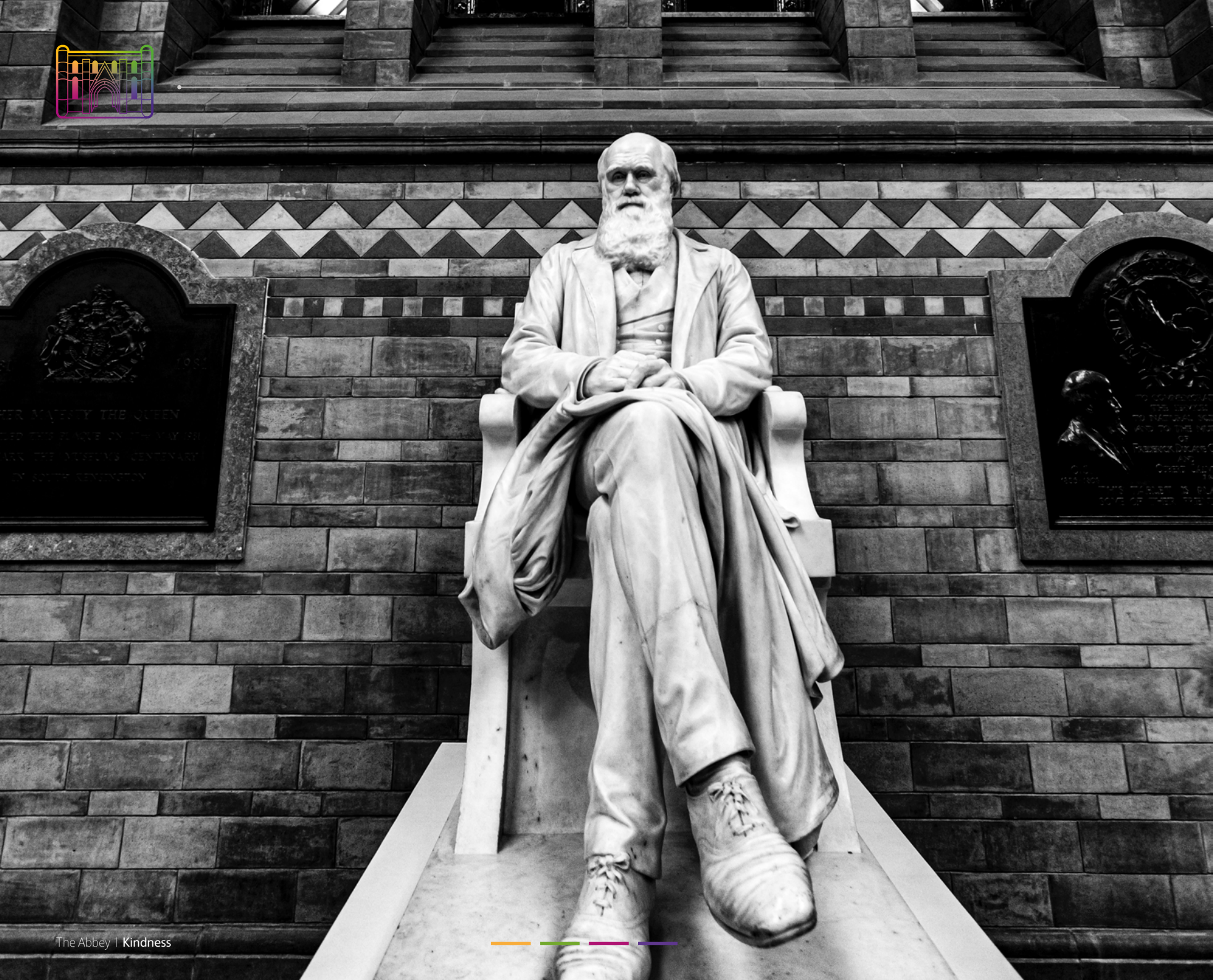
The Abbey

KINDNESS

Is kindness an evolutionary trait?

Reeti, Lower VI (Year 12)



Is kindness an evolutionary trait?

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Kindness puts a smile on people's faces and brightens up their day. Despite the fact that the word 'kindness' didn't emerge until the 14th century, kindness may be the most important evolutionary trait since bipedalism.

Take Darwin's theory of evolution: the idea that species can change over time, that new species come from pre-existing species, and all species share a common ancestor. You could argue that natural selection is the reason that you are able to read this article in the first place. However, does this theory also apply to the evolution of kindness? First, let's look at the example of the chameleon. Before chameleons could camouflage themselves, they were vulnerable and visible to their predators. Through the study of natural selection we know that spontaneous mutation would have led to variation among the chameleons. In turn, this variation would allow one chameleon to more accurately match the colour of its surroundings. Over time, more effective camouflage would probably have saved the chameleon from its predator and allowed it to survive and reproduce to pass on this favoured trait through genetic material that are called alleles. A perfect example of survival of the fittest in action.

Nevertheless, kindness seems to form a paradox with this competitive process of natural selection where only the fittest survive. Preliminary approaches from Darwin's time up until the 1960s tried to explain the evolution of kindness through the hypothesis that individuals behave cooperatively for the benefit of their group or species, despite personal interest. This theory - 'group selection theory' - was the only explanation for decades before scepticism creeped in. Could cooperative societies have evolved without being competitive?

The more recent selfish gene theory helps to explain this. It states that natural selection favours kindness to close relatives who look similar to us and share our genes. Providing aid to a relative is a way for us to pass on copies of our own genes as well as the fact that helping them, helps us in proportion, depending on the closeness of the relationship. However, this doesn't affect kindness towards strangers. For that, science has - you guessed it - another theory. This time it's called the theory of 'reciprocal altruism' and follows the latin phrase 'quid pro quo', meaning that 'You do this for me and I'll do that for you'. If two strangers take turns in exercising kindness, they can establish a relationship of repeating cooperation that benefits them both.

Nevertheless, it doesn't take a genius to know that this reciprocal altruism is often neglected in society. We've all heard the phrase: 'You have to be cruel to be kind'. We could look at this short-term cruelty resulting in long-term kindness as the continued evolution of an evolutionary trait. Another way kindness has evolved in modern society may be through random acts of kindness (I'd like to think we are more concerned with spreading smiles, rather than passing alleles, through kind actions). Some may argue that random acts of kindness are nice, but completely one-sided, and you have no way of knowing if it will even be paid forward. However, according to the Mayo Clinic Health System, kindness can physiologically have a positive impact on your brain. Being kind boosts serotonin and dopamine levels which are neurotransmitters that give you feelings of satisfaction and well-being and cause the reward centre of your brain to light up. In short, being kind is a win-win situation.

So, learning from these theories (the theory of evolution, natural selection, group selection, selfish gene theory and reciprocal altruism) we have learned that kindness is in fact an evolutionary trait (that may indeed still be evolving today). We should take that little bit of extra time to pay that kindness forward.

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