

Alumni Newsletter

Fall 2025

HUMANOMICS



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Kyle Blazer (class of '23) is thrilled to be facilitating the Spring 2026 Humanomics Alumni Colloquium. He first fell in love with Humanomics during his sophomore year, and his intellectual interests have since grown to include effective altruism, animal ethics, utilitarian philosophy, and free will. Kyle's ethical outlook has been particularly influenced by Peter Singer's *The Life You Can Save* and *Animal Liberation*.

Kyle graduated with degrees in Economics and Data Science and was involved in the Chapman University Economic Society (CUES) and Outdoors Club. After graduating, he embarked on a 6,000-mile road trip in his beloved minivan, visiting nine states and ten national parks over the course of six weeks. After getting the van-life bug out of his system, he joined the corporate world as a business valuation specialist at KPMG. He is now a Senior Associate in KPMG's Economic Services practice, where he conducts financial data analysis for the U.S. Navy. His work involves building financial dashboards, automating data processing and analysis, and developing data science models to improve the Navy's audit ability.



Outside of work, Kyle spends as much time outdoors as possible, whether mountain biking, surfing, skiing, backpacking, or checking another national park off his bucket list. He also enjoys cooking, visiting family in San Diego, and listening to podcasts and audiobooks on politics and philosophy.

Since graduation, Kyle has participated in every Humanomics Colloquium hosted by the Smith Institute. Returning to campus helps him sustain his relationships with staff and fellow alumni. The opportunity to discuss big ideas in an academic environment provides some of the most invigorating and rewarding moments of his year. He is incredibly excited to see familiar and new faces at the upcoming Spring Humanomics Colloquium!

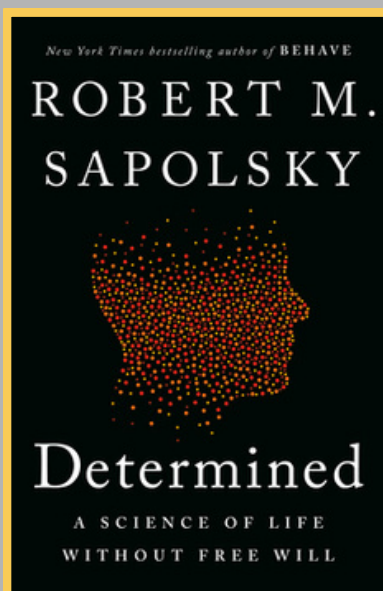
ALUMNI COLLOQUIUM

APRIL 17-18, 2026

By now, we hope you've seen the invitation for the Spring 2026 Humanomics Alumni Colloquium. It's the ninth colloquium, which is pretty exciting, and it's wonderful to still be gathering for discussion of ideas, for questioning, for thinking together.

This spring, we will be exploring "The Nature of Free Will," through Robert M. Sapolsky's book *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* and Kaveh Akbar's novel *Martyr!* Registration information can be found at the [Humanomics website](#).

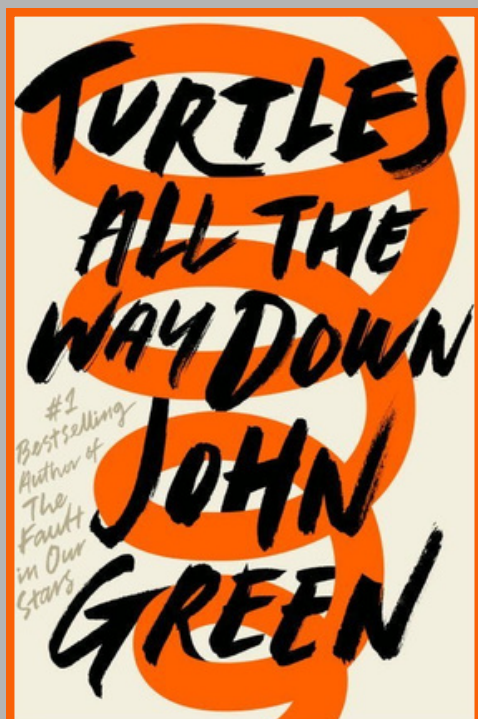
For centuries, philosophical traditions around the world have questioned the existence and nature of free will, asking if humans have control over their actions, have the power of self-determination. Such questions lead to discussions of good and evil, right and wrong, reward and punishment.



A sense of agency in our everyday lives, may lead us to determine that we make choices freely, that we do, indeed, have free will. If humans did not have free will, how could we determine right and wrong? How could we hold ourselves or others accountable for our actions? Such questions are inextricably linked to ideas of justice, of moral and ethical accountability. Free will is an important component in our understanding of who we are as human beings, important to our very identity. We choose, we like to believe, who we are.

Counter to this subjective account of our free will, lies the argument that human actions are determined by preceding events and natural laws. Sapolsky argues that biological and environmental interactions determine our choices, that “every aspect of behavior has deterministic, prior causes” (3) –turtles all the way down. If what we perceive as free choice is the result of complex factors over which we have no choice, how does this impact our sense of agency? Our very identity?

“Turtles all the way down?” you may ask. Sapolsky titles his first chapter, “Turtles All the Way Down,” referring to a story that is attributed to several different sources, including mythology, Bertrand Russell, Willima James, but the gist of it is that a scientist was giving a lecture about the Earth’s position in the universe. An audience member (often referred to as an elderly woman) said that the Earth is actually supported on the back of a giant turtle. When the scientist asks what the turtle is standing on, she responded, “on another turtle.” You can guess the next question, to which she responded, “turtles all the way down.”



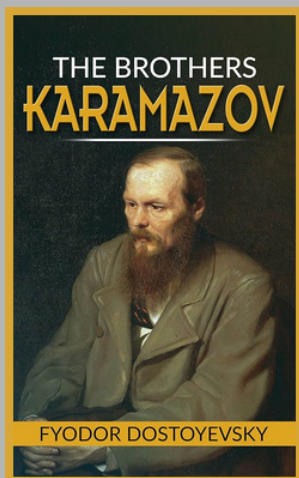
The phrase gained pop culture status with John Green’s YA novel *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017), Green has explained the story as a metaphor for infinite regress, where every explanation requires another explanation, that there’s no getting to the bottom of it. Referring to his own mental health, Green refers to the story when explaining how one experiencing obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is searching for that bottom turtle, thinking in continuous spirals or loops with no end. His novel features a teen suffering with OCD. While the story begins with a mystery, a missing billionaire of all things, it is more about teenage life and mental health. Aza, the narrator, is troubled with invasive thoughts about bacteria and infection, thoughts often interfering with the life she wants for herself. The novel’s

connection to our exploration of free will becomes quite clear in Aza's discussion of her OCD: "True terror isn't being scared; it's having no choice in the matter."

Kaveh Akbar also takes on questions of choice and free will in his novel *Martyr!* Cyrus Shams' father, an Iranian immigrant in Fort Wayne, Indiana contemplates free will:

What was there to complain about? A murdered wife? A sore back? The wrong grade copper? Living happened till it didn't. There was no choice in it. To say no to a new day would be unthinkable. So each morning, you said yes, then stepped into the consequence. (111)

Cyrus is searching for meaning. If your life is determined, if you don't have free will, what is the point? His mother, a passenger on a commercial airliner shot down in 1988, died when he was a baby. He says, "But my whole life I've thought about my mom on that flight, how meaningless her death was." (75). If there are no choices in life or death, where does that leave us?

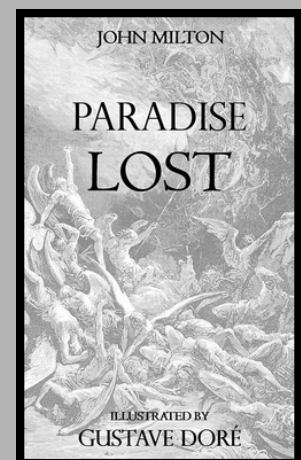


We see these questions in centuries of fiction and non-fiction alike. In a recent article on *The Brothers Karamazov*, Karl Knasgaard suggests that the characters in Dostoyevky's novel "are driven by forces other than those which they're aware of, mak[ing] the question of who they really are seem senseless" (The New Yorker, 21 October 2025). Are we driven by forces other than those which we're unaware of and, if so, does this negate the concept of free will, of self-determination? This questioning of free will and identity is pertinent to our discussion.

Milton ends *Paradise Lost* with Adam and Eve banished from the garden, suggesting they now have choice, are free to choose:

The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:

Yet are they free to choose? What does it mean that "Providence" is their guide? If God is guiding them, are they free to choose? Does this take us back to questions of fate or free will?



Or consider the coin toss scene in Ethan and Joel Cohen's 2007 film *No Country for Old Men*



It is this kind of inquiry that will focus the April 2026 Alumni Colloquium. Buckle up!

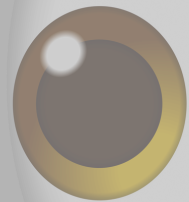
SPRING 2026 SCHEDULE

GUEST STORY

I KEEP CREEPIN' BY ALISON LEE

Do you ever feel like your choices are watching you?

"I keep creepin', I keep creepin',
A speed demon, speed demon"
— Justin Bieber, "SPEED DEMON"



On her first day in the hospital, Lacy felt courageous. She had kind of an epiphanic moment in there when she realized that she was living in a version of the Stanford prison experiment. So she tried to do something about it – an act of self sacrifice if you will. She was trying to be good. Or to do good.

Lacy was in her blue scrubs, disheveled, trying fruitlessly to gain back some control. She didn't even have shoes on. She started to do this bit she saw in a Netflix special about Ted Bundy. When Ted was in prison, he finessed his way into the big office with the comfy chair and the phone.

It was called the consultation room at the hospital. After Lacy was done consulting, she asked the nurse if she could stay in there for a while. The nurse agreed. And she was alone in there for quite a while, practically kicking her feet up on the desk. Her friend joined her too and they were coloring together. There was an assortment of crayons sprawled out between them. She was trying to gain back some control, fruitlessly.

Predictably, the staff started using intimidation tactics. There was a big man who stood by the door and he was threatening them with his words and his uniform. He asked them to leave the room, but Lacy wouldn't budge. Lacy's friend was starting to get worried. Then another man came for backup. They demanded they leave the room. Lacy's friend obeyed. Lacy waved goodbye to her and smiled gently. Then the doctor came in and threatened Lacy with her eyes. They told her that if she doesn't leave the room, they'll have to inject her. Eventually, the doctor stared straight through Lacy's soul and told her to go to her room. Lacy obeyed.

It sounds like a story from some cheesy movie, doesn't it?

The doctor kept saying Lacy was so timid.

Lacy felt scared, yes.

Reactive, yes.

Emotional, yes.

Not timid.

Turtles.

Fluvoxamine, Risperidone, and Trazodone.

Lacy's friends saw her in the hallway in the middle of the night and knew something was wrong. She looked like a zombie.

Cement wall.

That's what it felt like.

Lacy couldn't breathe.

They strapped her to a bed and took her to the bad place and no matter how much she kicked and screamed, there was no escaping.

Choices change things and yet just as often, they change nothing.

You are free to do a lot, just as long as you comply.

Or are you?

Lacy kept wondering if she could've chosen differently, or if the choice was ever really hers to make.

“So keep dreamin’, I can’t see ‘em
A speed demon, speed demon”
— “SPEED DEMON”

Lacy was a 25 Y female with a history of bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder who presented to the emergency room with increased mania, erratic behavior, on 5/15/20 after assessment by outpatient psychiatry.

Alison Lee (Class of ‘20) is an aspiring singer/songwriter exploring opportunities in tech. She is grateful to Humanomics for profoundly shaping the way she thinks, writes, and chooses.



We hope the Guest Essay Column will be a robust feature of the Humanomics Alumni Newsletter. We invite you to submit an essay. We are open to topics of interest to our community (which means there is great latitude). If you have any questions about this process, please email josborn@chapman.edu.



SUBMIT AN ESSAY

SUMMER SCHOLARS



The Summer Scholars program this year included 18 students and 6 faculty members. A third of the students came from institutions outside of Chapman, adding to the diverse intersection of study and interests. The entire group read and discussed Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Bart Wilson's *Meaningful Economics*, Hyrum Lewis and Verlan Lewis' *The Myth of Left and Right*, David Wiens' *From the Best to the Rest*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Albert Hirschmann's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, and Agnes Callard's *Open Socrates*.



SUMMER SCHOLARS

In addition to the large group readings, scholars acted as research assistants to their faculty mentors, each small group with varying primary focuses and side projects. Throughout the program, scholars were able to develop and learn various software, coding, participate in literature reviews, collect and analyze data, screen tv episodes and films, write Substack blogs to support their research, and interview their fellow scholars, faculty mentors, and Vernon Smith, for a podcast rightfully named *Thinkonomics*. Some were also able to explore the possibilities of self-designed majors and paths towards graduate study.



These students became researchers, collaborators, and members of a vibrant intellectual community. We look forward to watching what their futures hold.

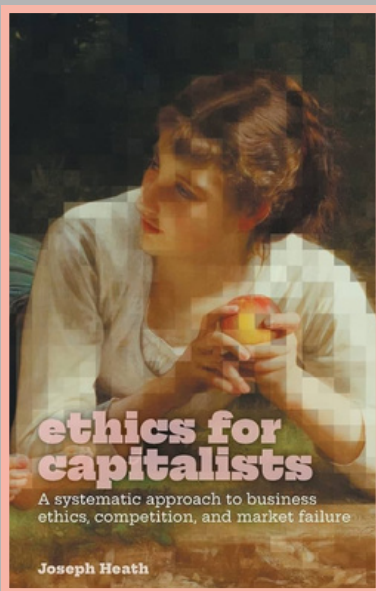


HUMANOMICS CLASSES

CONTINUE – FALL 2025

This fall Humanomics minors and other students at Chapman have opportunities to immerse themselves in ideas by integrating economics, literature, and philosophy in the Fall 2025 Humanomics courses.

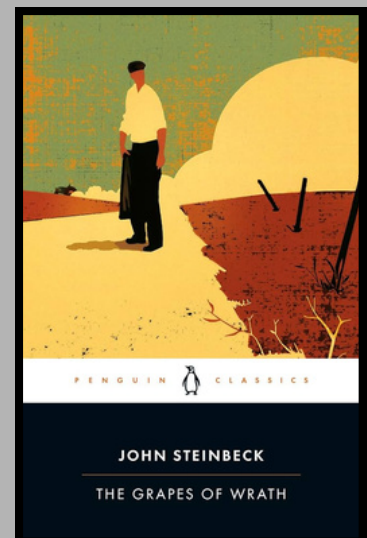
Professors Aaron Salomon and Bart Wilson are teaching a *Seminar in Ethics and Economic Thought*. The course asks students to consider



Why is the modern world rich? Why, in economics, do human beings do what they do? Why must markets be constrained to work as they should? This course dialogically explores Deirdre McCloskey's *Bourgeois Equality*, Bart Wilson's *Meaningful Economics*, and Joseph Heath's *Ethics for Capitalists* to explore how ideas, moral sentiments, and the implicit morality of market institutions together shape modern economic life. The student's task is to develop their own account of what makes economic life not only functional, but justifiable—intellectually, ethically, and historically—considering the tensions and insights these texts reveal.

Professors Bas van der Vossen and Alessandro Del Ponte are teaching *Topics in Humanomics: Justice-fying Property*. They are exploring

a question central to modern commercial society: what is the nature and significance of ownership and debt? Our questions include: What is property, and why do we have it? What does it mean to owe a debt? Can we owe without being owned ourselves? Under what circumstances, if any, are relations of ownership and debt compatible with justice? This course dialogically explores Bart Wilson's *The Property Species*, David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, and John Steinbeck's, *The Grapes of Wrath* to shape how we understand these relationships.



Dr. Del Ponte, Political Science Professor, describes his experience in the Humanomics classroom:

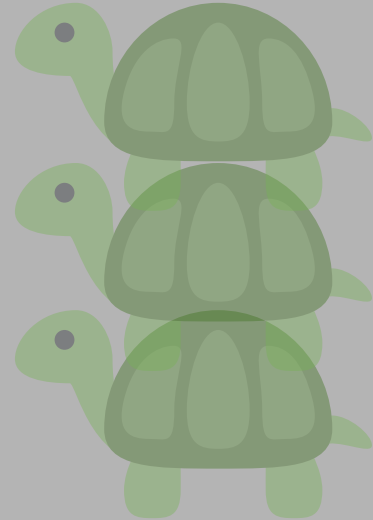
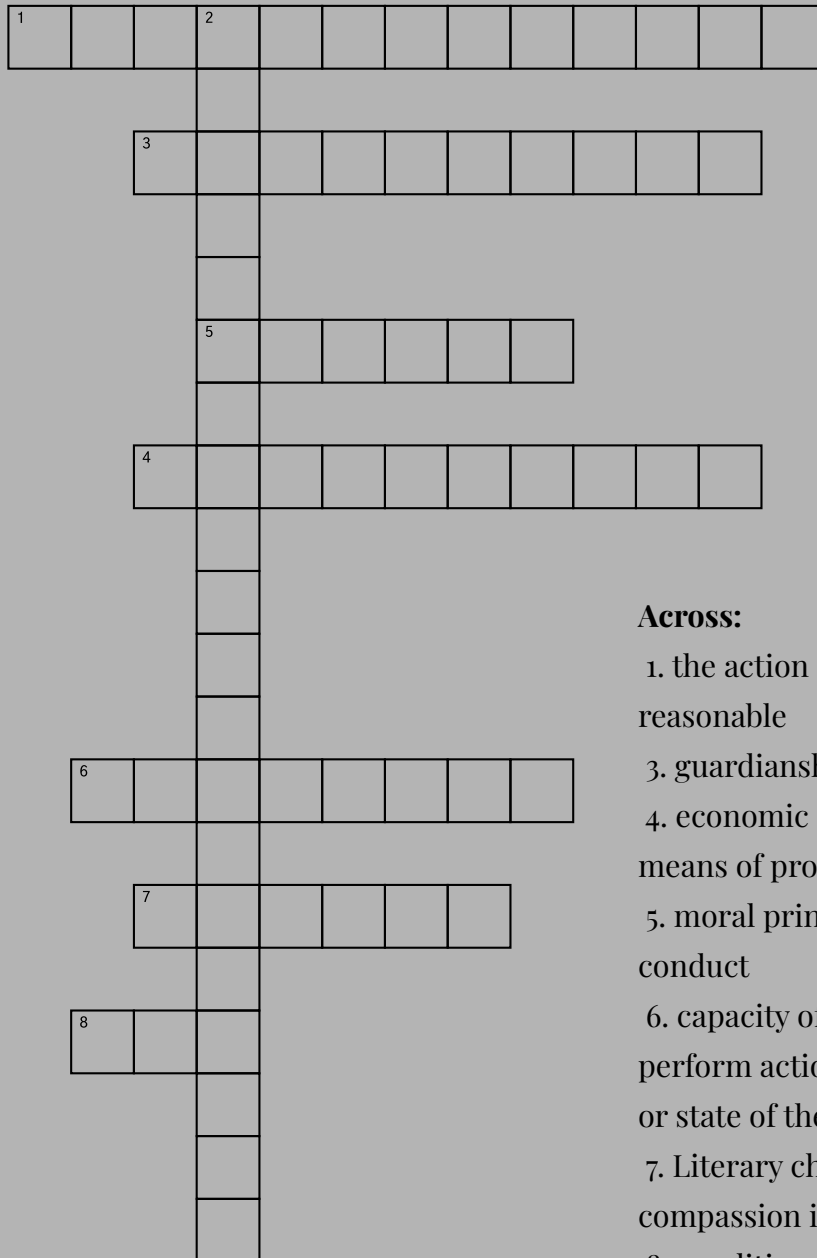
"Co-teaching my first Humanomics class has been a transformative experience for me. As faculty, I realized how much you can learn from students' insights during Socratic seminars. Because Humanomics is inherently cross-disciplinary, it stimulates inquisitive thinking and trains students to formulate crisp, cogent questions. Students are engaged and eager to read, write, and discuss difficult questions. This particular course on property tackles questions that are at the heart of political disagreements in today's America. It is refreshing to see students come out of this course more open-minded and readier to challenge stereotypes about debt and property compared to when they started the class. I look forward to teaching more Humanomics courses in 2026."

Leo Berger, a senior Business Administration & Economics major, discusses his experience in Topics in Humanomics:

"Even though I'm an Economics major, this was my first Humanomics course, and I've really enjoyed it so far. The readings from Wilson, Graeber, and Steinbeck, combined with our class discussions, have challenged and reshaped many of my preconceived ideas about property, ownership, and the systems that uphold them. The class is both challenging and rewarding, not just because of the amount of material, but because of the many connections that can be made between the ideas. These connections are what make the class special, creating a communal search for understanding where everyone shares their own perspective to make a bit more sense of it all, linking the readings to their personal experiences, ideas, and assumptions."

As alumni, we have a feeling some of the feelings expressed by both faculty and students alike resonate with your experience.

HUMANOMICS MINI



Across:

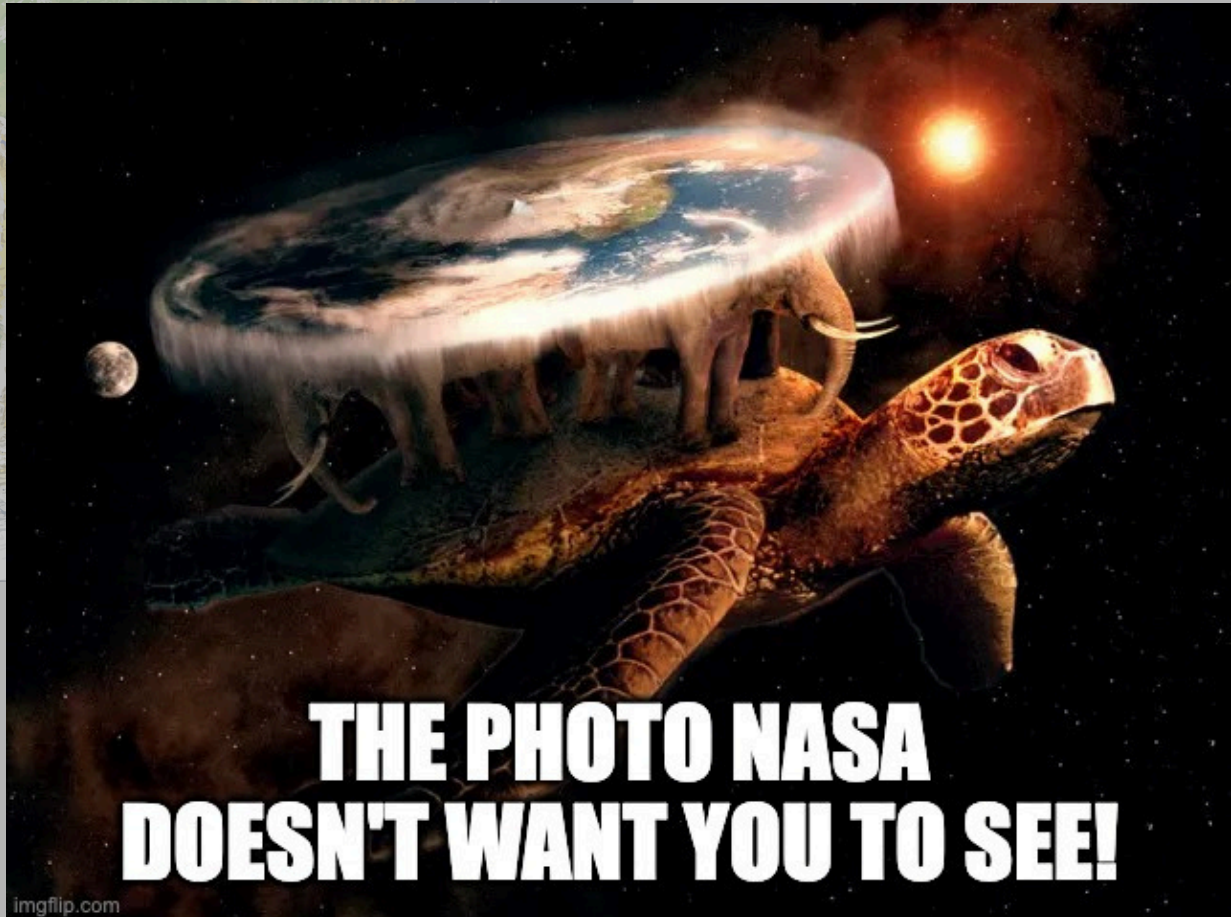
1. the action of showing something to be right or reasonable
3. guardianship provided by deity
4. economic system with private ownership of means of production
5. moral principles that govern a person's conduct
6. capacity of humans to make decisions or perform actions independently of any prior event or state of the universe
7. Literary character who embodies strength and compassion in the face of economic hardship
8. condition characterized by intrusive, unwanted thoughts and repetitive, ritualistic behaviors

Down:

2. Metaphor for "infinite regress"

Answer key is at the end!

MEME



SUBMIT A MEME

THANK YOU FOR READING

We appreciate you. See you in Issue #4.



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MINI ANSWER KEY

[illegible]