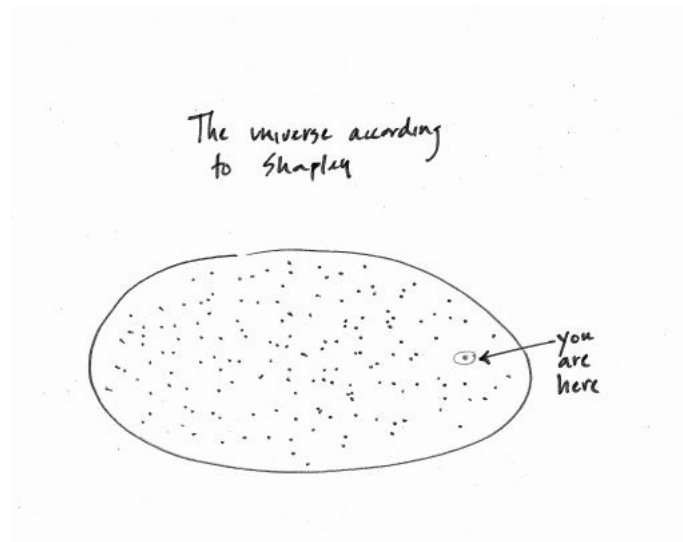


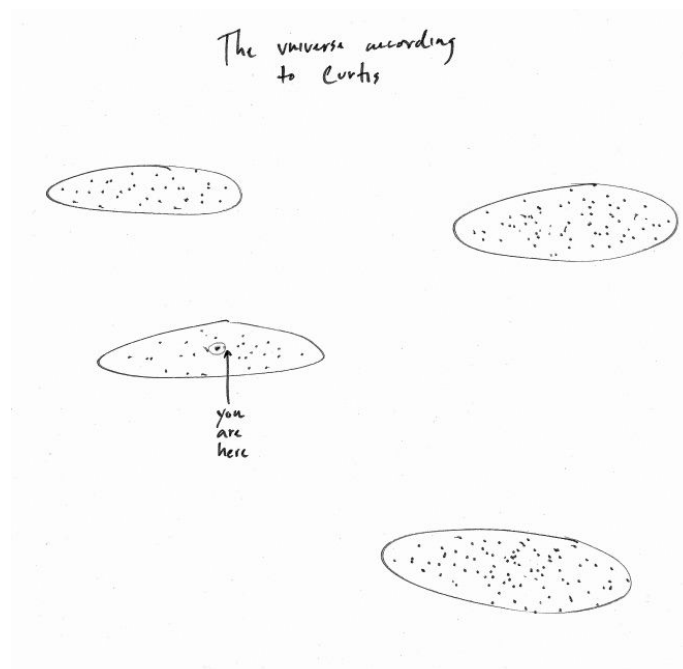
The Great Debate

One of the most important events in astronomy was the Great Debate in 1920. The Great Debate was between astronomers Harlow Shapley and Heber Curtis. Both astronomers had seen fuzzy blobs in space through a telescope. But they disagreed on how this evidence should be interpreted.

Shapley said that the stars in the sky made up our universe, and there was nothing beyond it. He said that we live on a planet going around one star (our Sun) at the edge of a great universe of stars held together by gravity, surrounded by vast emptiness. He said that the blobs in the sky that we see with telescopes were just regular clouds of dust and gas, called nebulae, scattered among the stars.



Opposing him was Heber Curtis, who believed that the stars in our sky were just a tiny fraction of our universe. He said that we live on a planet going around one star (our Sun) at the center of a great island of stars held together by gravity and surrounded by many more islands of stars, also held together by gravity.



Discuss with your class your ideas about these questions:

1. How did Shapley's model for the universe explain the evidence they had at the time? How did Curtis's model for the universe explain that same evidence?
2. What would you do to resolve this debate? What kind of data would you collect, and how?