NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

Enduring Questions
Institution: University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

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DIVISION OF EDUCATION
PROGRAMS

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Narrative Section of a Successful Application

This sample of the narrative portion from a grant is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. This sample proposal does not include a budget, letters of commitment, résumés, or evaluations.

Project Title: NEH Enduring Questions Course on the Nature of the Cosmos

Institution: University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Project Director: J.B. Shank

Grant Program: Enduring Questions

NEH Enduring Questions Proposal

What is the nature of the cosmos and how do we, as humans, find our place within it?

J.B. Shank, Department of History, University of Minnesota

Intellectual Rationale: In the minds of most people today, science exists as an unquestioned good, a marker of the progressive advance of the human species toward an increasing comprehension of and mastery over nature. Few question the easy conflation that we moderns make between our contemporary scientific understanding of the cosmos and the actual character of that complex, diverse and multifaceted entity that presents itself to us as "the world out there." Yet science is not synonymous with the cosmos itself; it is a human assemblage of representations that explain (in ways that moderns find overwhelmingly persuasive) who we are as humans and how we fit into the grand system of the universe. In this respect, the modern scientific worldview does not represent our ultimate arrival at the "true" understanding of the universe, even if that is the conceit of many moderns. It is rather the most recent in a long line of cosmological understandings. As such it can be comprehended in a much more profound and meaningful way by looking at it in comparison to different cosmological conceptions.

This Enduring Questions course will offer students comparative reflection upon our modern cosmological assumptions by looking at the ways that other peoples in previous historical periods have imagined the cosmos and the place of humans within it. To pursue this inquiry we will need to consider a vast sweep of time and engage in comparisons across large cultural and historical units. We will also need to think in predisciplinary terms since cosmological assumptions dictate disciplinary boundaries regarding truth and error. To think seriously and comparatively about cosmological difference therefore requires a willingness to break free from modern disciplinary assumptions and an ability to think against the grain of conventional discipline-based understandings of knowledge. Cultivating this kind of historically

deep and methodologically predisciplinary understanding also empowers students, for it will lead them to recognize the cosmological assumptions at play in their own lives and equip them to critically reflect upon their meaning and value.

Envisioned Course Design: The course will pursue two related inquiries while stressing the way that these dimensions synergize in the production of cosmological understanding. On the one hand, the course will focus on the efforts made by humans to understand and represent the overall architecture of the universe. On the other hand, it will examine how these architectures always assume a human subject that is the knower, believer, and meaningful agent in these cosmological systems. Cosmology as we will approach it involves the constant and mutual inter-definition of the macro-cosmic and the micro-human, a dynamic that continually germinates mediate objects as well (family, community, ritual, knowledge, myth, etc.). We will study these outcomes through their production from within this fundamental dynamic. We will also pose fundamental questions about the dynamic itself, asking how antique Greek pagans, Hindus, medieval Christians and Muslims, and the new scientific moderns of the European Renaissance understood the nature of the cosmos and the place of the well ordered human life within it.

To organize our inquiry, we will use a comparative historical approach. The course will have three major sections. ***I. Antique Cosmologies in Comparative Perspective:*** Our point of entry will be a comparative look at three or four ancient cosmologies. The relationship between cosmologies with singular as opposed to plural organizing principles—a difference manifest most strikingly in the contrasts between monotheistic and polytheistic cultures—will focus this section. We will explore the polytheistic cosmology of Greco-Roman antiquity, using Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* to understand the polytheistic architecture and dynamics of this cosmology. We will also explore Greek mythology as revealed in works like Ovid's *Metamorphose* and the myth-history entanglements of Homer's *Odyssey* to examine the

subjectivities defined by and within Greco-Roman cosmology. We will then contrast Greco-Roman polytheism with the monotheistic cosmologies of the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, using readings from the foundational texts of these religions, including *Genesis*, *The Gospel of John*, and some selected *surahs* from *The Qu'ran*, to examine the interplay of cosmos and self. We will then compare aspects of Abrahamic monotheism and Greco-Roman polythesism. To round out this inquiry we will consider two other traditions that complicate this monotheistic-polytheistic dichotomy. Hinduism encompasses a number of ancient cosmologies that defy easy classification in these terms, and since there is a terrific Hindu temple in the Twin Cities that is welcoming to visitors we will incorporate readings from the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Vedic texts along with a visit to this temple to compare Hindu cosmology and the others already studied. In addition, given the strong presence of native peoples and traditions in Minnesota, interaction with the stories and traditions of the Native American community, including a field trip to local Dakota and Ojibwe sites, will deepen this comparative work.

II. Western Monotheisms in Comparative Perspective: The second section of the course will focus on a comparative study of the competing cosmologies of the medieval West. We will begin with Greek philosophy, examining pre-Socratic efforts to reframe the cosmos in terms of singular rational principles. A Platonic dialogue will be included to pose the Socratic method of dialectical reasoning as an alternative epistemology for knowing the difference between truth and myth. We will use another Platonic text, *The Phaedo*, to consider the problem of the individual life within this Greek philosophical frame, and then turn to the cosmological frameworks of medieval Christianity and Islam. Works by Paul and Augustine will illustrate the interplay between philosophy and scripture in framing the Christian life, and the scholastic philosophical-Christian cosmology of Thomas Aquinas will be scrutinized through a reading of significant

portions of Dante's *Commedia*. The 12th century Muslim scholar Ibn Tufayl's state of nature fable *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* will reconnect us with the *Qu'ran,* thus framing a further set of comparisons regarding reason, philosophy, and the self within the Abrahamic cosmos of medieval Islam. Visual materials, such as medieval maps and a comparative study of medieval religious buildings (Chartres vs. the Alhambra), will enrich these comparisons.

III. The Beginnings of Modern Scientific Cosmology in Comparative Perspective: We will complete the course by examining modern, Western, scientific cosmology as it emerged in Europe after 1400. The University of Minnesota is home to a fantastic early modern research collection, the James Ford Bell Library, whose original books, maps, and manuscripts, will introduce students to the changing picture of the cosmos in Europe during this period. The library houses a rich collection of European geographies and cosmographies from before and after the Columbian encounter of 1492, and maps that chronicle such cartographic changes as the birth of the geometric European-Mercator understanding of the planet. European travel narratives from the sixteenth and seventeenth-century, many with stunning visual images, are also abundant in the Bell. All this material will be used to study early modern transformation of European cosmology through its encounters with the wider world. Using the context of the cosmological changes brought by European expansion and globalization, we will then turn to the new scientific cosmology produced in the wake of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. The Galileo Affair will introduce the "new science" of the period and the challenges, both real and imagined, that it posed to the prevailing cosmological assumptions of the time. We will examine the scientific cosmology of Isaac Newton and interrogate its underlying assumptions by studying the correspondence between the Newtonian acolyte Samuel Clarke and the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. Descartes' *Meditations* provides a new founding myth for the modern scientific subject, while the work of Blaise Pascal exposes the worries attendant to the arrival of this new

cosmology. Readings from Kant, Nietzsche, Kafka, Heidegger, Weber, and Derrida, posing questions about the place of the individual within our modern scientific cosmos, will conclude this section. A "finale" designed to transfer students' learning about these questions to present circumstances, will involve a discussion of Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, with its dystopic image of a future built through the power of human genetic engineering, along with a reading of Donna Haraway's classic essay "A Cyborg Manifesto."

Teaching Value and Plan of Work: The course will be a one-semester (14-week) course targeted at about 25 early career undergraduates (but open to all pre-baccalaureate students) that will focus on the intensive reading (approx. 200 pages per week) and discussion of a select yet diverse collection of texts, visual images, and artistic objects. It will employ the UMN web-based course support system Moodle to arrange weekly assignments where students can write and interact directly with the course materials and each other. Class sessions will be similarly interactive with large- and small-group discussion focused on both specific and open-ended questions designed to provoke critical thinking and creative reflection. Informal, short in-class writings will be used with these discussions, sometimes before class to prime reflection and sometimes after class to foster synthetic interpretations. Formal course assignments, namely critical essays, will further emphasize this interactive and student-centered pedagogical approach. Field trips to sites such as Hindu Mandir of Minnesota will foster interactive, experiential learning and help students to bond with one another as a learning community.

Developing this course will advance my own teaching agendas, but the course will especially help the university's new interdepartmental program in Religious Studies, established last year. By serving as a gateway course into both Religious Studies and humanistic inquiry more generally, the course will help students to see this field as a dynamic meeting point for a wide array of related humanistic inquiries. My summer preparation prior to teaching the course

will focus on paring and organizing my syllabus, gathering readings into a course packet and making arrangements for field trips and class visits to the Bell Library. I will also build my own expertise in the non-Western dimensions of my course syllabus by pursing a program of reading and expert consultation with the knowledgeable faculty from the Asian Languages and Literatures and the American Indian departments at Minnesota.

Faculty Preparation: I am an intellectual historian with specializations in the history of Western philosophy and the history of modern science. I hold an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in History and Humanities from Stanford and a graduate degree from the well-known "Great Books" program at St. John's College, Annapolis, MD. My teaching and scholarship are explicitly interdisciplinary, bringing together interests in history, philosophy, art history, and literary studies. For more than a decade, science has been at the center of my teaching efforts, and I have been developing classes that provoke students to reflect on the nature and power of the science they live with every day. One result has been a two-semester course surveying Modern European Intellectual history from Antiquity to the present. Another is an undergraduate seminar examining the early modern emergence of science and Enlightenment in Europe after 1600. I have also collaborated with an art historian in creating a course called "The Age of Curiosity: Art and Knowledge in Europe, 1400-1800," which looks at the beginnings of Western science through its relationship to the visual arts during the early modern era. This course challenges the alleged opposition between "art" and "science" while asking students to consider science as both a visually grounded regime of knowing and a way of thinking about nature that only begins once the evidence of the eyes is discarded. The Enduring Questions course I am proposing will expand my research and teaching about these issues by taking my work outside of the Western frameworks that have so far guided it and by providing me an occasion to further intensify my interdisciplinary and humanistic approach to science studies.

Preliminary Course Reading List for "The Nature of the Cosmos":

I. Antique Cosmologies in Comparative Perspective:
Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*
Homer, *Odyssey*
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Genesis
The Gospel of John
The Qu'ran
The Bhagavad Gita
Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux

II. Western Monotheisms in Comparative Perspective:
Selections from Parmenides, Democritus, and Pythagoras
Plato, *The Sophist*, *Timmaeus*, and *Phaedo*
Paul, "Epistle to the Romans"
Augustine, *Confessions*
Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*
Dante, *Commedia*
Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*

III. The Beginnings of Modern Scientific Cosmology in Comparative Perspective:
Galileo Galilei, "Letter to Grand Duchess Christina" and *Dialogues Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*
Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*
The Correspondence of Samuel Clarke and Gottfried Leibniz
René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*
Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"
Friedrich Nietzsche "Parable of the Madman"
Franz Kafka, "A Report to a Scientific Academy"
Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture"
Max Weber, "Science as Vocation"
Jacques Derrida "The Ends of Man"
Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

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