

Of Prickles and Goo: How MAPS is redefining the science of spirituality



Brad Burge, M.A.

Ph.D. student,
University of California, San Diego,
MAPS Intern
bburge@ucsd.edu

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AT FIRST GLANCE, MAPS is hard to pin down. It exists somewhere between the sterile objectivity of clinical psychopharmacology and the passionate creativity of psychedelic counterculture. This strange combination of science and spirituality means that it's equally at home at academic conferences and music festivals, allowing it to reach all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Reaching across disciplines and making unexpected connections between radically different ways of knowing and being in the world, MAPS and its supporters are making something new.

I must have sensed this when I first contacted MAPS about the possibility of helping them out over the summer. I was looking for a way to put my writing (such as it was) to use, and there was something about their confident hybridity that pulled me in. I had studied psychology in college, and was somewhat familiar with the meticulous and painstaking process of designing and running clinical research studies. But of course there was much more to it than that. My own experiences with psychedelics had been among the most personally transformative and deeply therapeutic moments I had ever had, and they had shown me how immensely powerful—and, yes, potentially dangerous—such experiences could be.

In a famous lecture, philosopher Alan Watts divided the world into two kinds of people. On one hand, there are “prickly” people who insist on there being a precise form and structure to the world and who refuse to budge until all the facts are known. “The prickly people,” Watts observed, “are advocates of intellectual porcupinism: they want rigor, they want precise statistics, and they have a certain clipped attitude in their voices. And you know this very well in academic circles, where there are people who are always edgy like that. And they accuse other people of being disgustingly vague and miasmic and mystical.” Well, I happen to be one of those spiny individuals. I am fascinated by categories, definitions, and differences; and I admire science for its persistent attempts to make sense out of the world. Of course, science today has its own problems—money, prejudice, and laziness too often determine what gets examined and what gets left out. Knowledge and politics, it seems, are inseparable in the modern world.

Like any tool, science can be used for good as well as for evil. MAPS proudly acknowledges that it uses the language of statistics and clinical psychiatry to prove a point—not that psychedelics by themselves are a “cure” for anything or that they should be freely available to everyone or even that they are without risk. What MAPS does want to prove is that to exclude certain kinds of research out of fear, to willfully ignore certain ways of thinking about the world simply because they challenge our assumptions, is completely unacceptable and fundamentally detrimental to our health, our society, and our survival as human beings. When it comes to politics, MAPS knows who to call and how to work with them. And when it comes to science, MAPS insists on getting the details right and making sure that everything goes as planned (if you've ever read one of their research protocols, you'll know just what I mean). This is MAPS at its most prickly.

Of course, there's more to the story. Once again, Watts keeps us moving: “But the vague, miasmic, and mystical people accuse the prickly people of being mere skeletons with no flesh on their bones. And they say, ‘You just rattle. You're not really a human being. You know the words but you don't know the music.’” These, he tells us, are the “gooey” people. Well, I happen to be one of those people, too. Isn't science a tool like any other? Of what use are our efforts to understand the world if we don't have some idea of what we would like to do with it? Call me miasmic, but I'm pretty sure that without a little bit of art and a little bit of music, science is downright boring.

This creative restlessness, this perpetual discomfort with static categories, is exactly what sets MAPS apart from other research organizations. What MAPS wants to do is not so much to erase the line between spiritual growth and psychotherapeutic treatment as to point out that there may not have ever been a difference in the first place. After all, what is it that we're trying to accomplish with all the money and research that we pour into psychiatry and pharmaceutical research?

Why spend billions of dollars and years of work developing new drugs and new treatments that may or may not work, and that ultimately end up benefiting only those who make and sell them? MAPS recognizes that the goal of all this is simply to make us happier and healthier human beings, and that in order to accomplish this we may need to look in unexpected places.

MAPS knows that science cannot always provide the answers to our most difficult and enduring questions. A person struggling to overcome posttraumatic stress or a person engaged in a life-or-death battle with opiate addiction needs much more than a drug. MAPS is at the center of a closely connected and deeply caring network of artists, sages, shamans, students, professionals, musicians, and revolutionaries who know that real healing can only happen in community with others. To call such a community “countercultural” would be to miss the point: MAPS and its supporters have always understood that to achieve new ways of living and better ways of being in relation to others and to ourselves demands that such changes take place throughout our culture, extending far beyond the realm of the merely “scientific” or the merely “medical.” This is MAPS at its most gooey.

But we must also ask whether the distinction between reason and art—between science and creativity—is perhaps a false one. Watts, in his uniquely category-confusing style, seemed to think that it was: “But we know very well that this natural universe is neither prickles nor goo exclusively: it’s gooey prickles and prickly goo...and we’re always playing with the two.” Straddling the line between science and counterculture, MAPS operates in a space all its own. It is neither a pharmaceutical company nor a countercultural cult, and distances itself from those who would seek to profit from new pharmaceutical treatments as much as from those who would claim that psychedelics and marijuana are without their own risks and their own complicated histories. It’s a new kind of institution and embodies a new way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and their technologies.

And that’s exactly why very little stands in the way of MAPS and those who support it financially, spiritually, and politically. MAPS can be open and confident about its mission to open up new avenues of research that not very long ago would have been seen as revolutionary or even dangerous—like giving MDMA (commonly known as Ecstasy) to perfectly healthy therapists in order to teach them something about what their patients might be experiencing during psychedelic psychotherapy sessions. MAPS knows that textbook knowledge of the pharmacological effects of psychedelics is not enough, and that a more complete understanding of these drugs and their demonstrated potential to help people suffering from traumatic illnesses demands a more personal and intuitive approach as well. Empathy and science are hardly mutually exclusive forms of knowledge—they’re just two complementary ways of looking at the world. For MAPS, science and art go hand in hand, and it’s always playing with the two. •

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