ARTEFACTS, AND TAKING ON A RELIGIOUS VARIATION

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Abstract

Artefacts mediate human perception and behaviour for sure, but what is less clear is the way their mediation is exerted. The reason for this ambiguity lies partially in the fact that artefacts work differently in different contexts. Ihde invented the term multistability to address this characteristic inherent in artefacts. So, there might be various types of mediation conceivable based on such a multitude of stabilities a given artefact could take on. In this article, I try to shed some light on the phenomenon of multistability to see how particularly religious stability may emerge from an otherwise profane artefact. To that end, I will place my focus on the tradition of Islamic calligraphy and the pivotal role reed pens have played in it and explore accordingly how both secular and religious stability might arise from the seemingly same physical object. For that purpose, I will suggest drawing on MacIntyre's views on three notions of practice, narrative, and tradition, and will argue that these three notions may spotlight how an artefact could receive varying stabilities.

1 ARTEFACTS, AND MULTIPLICITY OF VARIATIONS

There is well-established literature today on the role of artefacts in reconfiguring the human condition. One strong trend pursuing this track is postphenomenology, whose rich disposal of various notions has proven efficacious. Despite some divergences (Ihde, 1990, 2009) , postphenomenology defines itself along the general agenda of Husserlian phenomenology insofar as what is of interest for it, is consciousness and exploring how the world appears as it does rather than another. But what differentiates it from classical phenomenology is an accentuated stress it places on the role of technology in (re)configuring the human condition.

Central to postphenomenology is the notion of *mediation* devised to address the active role of technology in structuring human condition (Ihde 1990; Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015; Verbeek 2005). Technology, it is argued, mediates the way we relate to the world, or put differently, artefacts fundamentally reconfigure how the world appears or otherwise is engaged. Crucially, the mediating role of technology is inherently fluid, situational, and context-dependent, so at least to some extent, it seems unpredictable. This speaks to the suggestion that, rather than armchair speculation, a postphenomenological study would place a pronounced emphasis on empirically formed endeavours to see how mediation is exerted in real circumstances (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015).

Such unpredictability refers yet to a further notion within postphenomenology and that is *multi-stability*. The term was intended by Ihde to particularly highlight the malleability of technology and counter the deterministic view of technology, according to which technology predetermines outcomes prior to its use. No technology is 'one thing, nor is it incapable of belonging to multiple contexts', notes Ihde's, or equally, technological artifacts exhibit different qualities in different contexts, they have variations of stabilities (Ihde, 1999, p. 47; Ihde, 2009, p. 16) .

Yet, technology, even if far from determined, organizes the possibilities for actions nonetheless, and this effect comes partially thanks to the materiality or physical configuration of artefacts. I will revert to this later, but it would already be instructive to notice that the materiality and concreteness presented by artefacts foster specific tracks for engagements, out of which only a few might prove operational. A hammer, Ihde says, 'could be used as a paperweight, an objet d'art, a murder weapon, a pendulum weight, a door handle' (Ihde 1993: 37), and possibly some others, yet there is nonetheless a great chance that it 'is dominantly used, for its designed purpose', namely hammering. This evokes the impression that artefacts, to a high degree, homogenize users' behaviours. This rather high chance of similar users' behaviours fuelled by the homogenizing effect of artefacts could, in turn, bring to the surface the broader context of technology use by first, bringing together all those using a given artefact, say, a hammer, and second, spotlighting the practice within which that artefact is integral, say, carpentry. While postphenomenology is more oriented toward individuals, and as yet it is not well equipped with the required conceptual tools to address sociopolitical variables (Arzroomchilar, 2022; Rosenberger, 2014, 2017), I suggest drawing on a further framework that is well-oriented to collectives, and that is MacIntyre's work. The aim of the current writing is twofold. First, I argue that a combination of MacIntyre's work on *Practice, narrative*, and *tradition* on the one hand, and postphenomenology on the other, helps explain how artefacts acquire a dominant stability. Second, followingly, I will elaborate on how such integration could also help to account for the way artefacts might take on particularly a religious character[1]. This will be illustrated by the case of Islamic calligraphy. Let us take a brief look at MacIntyre's ideas first.

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[1] The religious dimension of artefacts is highlighted here to also hint at the potential links of postphenomenology to the growing literature of the so-called material religion whose aim is to accentuate that what should be at stake in studies of religion is in effect how bodies work with artefacts and how such embodied interactions could lead to religious or spiritual experiences. Although this article touches upon the

2 MACINTYRE ON PRACTICE, NARRATIVE, AND TRADITION

MacIntyre's concern is rationality, in particular practical rationality and moral judgments. He was astonished by the alleged inadequacy of modern ethical frameworks to properly react to questions as seemingly obvious as 'why Stalinism is wrong?' (Lutz 2004). While working around such quandaries, and accordingly his return to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, he invokes three salient notions; *practice, narrative,* and *tradition*, to enrich Aristotelian thought. I suggest contemplating how such notions might apply in the context of technology and how, as a result, technology might be carried over into the broader domains of society and history.

The first notion, practice, is defined as follows;

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence, which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre 2007: 187).

There are a number of terms in need of clarification. First, to unfold the distinction between internal goods and external goods, we can draw on his oft-cited account of learning chess as a child (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 188). The kid is lured into chess playing and learning its rules first by receiving a candy. However, candy serves only as an *external good*. As long as the kid's incentive for rule-following remains candy, she might be tempted to try a shortcut, that is, she could perhaps cheat and win the candy. She might even ask for money from her and buy candy. So, external goods like cany do not guarantee persistence in performing the practice, therefore, there should also be some *internal* goods in place. For instance, a sincere desire to learn chess and become proficient would lead to a genuine pursuit of learning chess standards of excellence. Internal goods, therefore, as the name suggests, are inherent to a certain practice, so, contrary to external rewards that can be achieved through different paths, internal goods can not be skirted.

Next, practices should be also 'coherent' and this brings us to a further notion which is the potential of practices to become 'systematically extended'. Practices must prove coherency to allow for gradual evolvement as well as extension of standards of excellence. Extendibility implies that practices evolve over time, so they are far from a one-off, nor is there any one-size-fits-all way of carrying out the practice. Rather, they are subject to continuous modifications; 'the goods [internal to practices] themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 194).

But what counts as a practice? MacIntyre's articulation ensures that humans at any given moment are often engaged with one type of practice or another, and hence there can exit a plenitude of practices; football, chess, architecture, farming, painting, music, to 'the making and sustaining of family life' and 'the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology'.

But to harmonize all practices within one's course of life and organize them into a consistent whole, MacIntyre introduces the next notion, *narrative*. One's narrative is his story encompassing his whole life events, and in this sense, narrative, 'links birth to life to death' (MacIntyre, 1984, 205), that is, it is a story of a 'self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative'. In Lutz's words, every narrative is a 'story of a person's quest for the good' (Lutz, 2004, 78). Having a story of life is crucial in forming one's track of life; 'I can only answer the

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topic in the following it cannot go into details of this path and readers could find valuable works on *material religion* (e.g. Morgan 2021)

question, "What must I do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"' (MacIntyre, 1984, 205). Human actions, on MacIntyre account, are 'enacted narratives', meaning that they have significance only in the light of one's life tale, that is, insofar as acts could be situated under a consistent narrative.

The notion of narrative, as is clear, holds together all practices one engages in during life. Yet, practices are 'socially established cooperative human activity' and so it follows that the notion of practice implies moreover other participants with whom one shares society, history, and more importantly, tradition. The notion of *tradition* is the last piece of MacIntyre's thought to put forward. We are only '*co-authors* of our own narratives' (MacIntyre, 1984, 213, italic added), MacIntyre maintains. It follows practices are not simply constituents of 'my' story; rather they are embedded in a wider network upon which my story is only part;

> [T]he key question for men … is not about their own authorship … We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to understand how others respond to us and how our response to them is apt to be construed (MacIntyre, 1984, 216).

We are born into traditions, so, our stories are intertwined with other narratives, and therefore, our narrative is shaped in response to others, both contemporary and past generations;

> It is by hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings … that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they are born and what the ways of the world are (MacIntyre, 1984, 216).

But what all this does have to do with technology and the multiplicity of variations it might take on? Quite a lot, I suggest. In the next section, I try to show how MacIntyre's ideas could throw light on the notion of *multi-stability*, and along the way, I will also elaborate on how particularly *religious* stability may emerge from an otherwise profane artefact.

3 RELIGIOUS VARIATION; A NARRATIVE OF CALLIGRAPHY PRACTICE IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

We recall that the starting point of MacIntyre' endeavour is a wish to scrutinize -both theoretical and practical- rationality. His idea in a nutshell is that rationality is ingrained and embedded in *traditions*, and accordingly, rationality, but also morality, is *tradition-constituted* (MacIntyre, 1984). Rationality arises from the experience of living through a particular tradition (Lutz, 2004, p. 57), and all of its components evolve from accumulated wisdom within the same tradition throughout history; so, rationality is bound to *tradition*. Thus, MacIntyre prefers using the term rationalities over rationality, but also justices over justice.

Furthermore, narrative takes shape in the context of the *tradition*, basically as a consistent story – at both individual and collective levels- to make lifeworld intelligible and life worth pursuing. Creating *narrative* therefore implies an idiosyncratic way of connecting all dots within one's, as well as a society's, course of life, and piecing them together and accordingly rendering life a meaningful whole. Importantly, narrative also constitutes a recourse to which a person, or a society, would have, to resolve facing enquiries, problems, challenges, and crises.

On MacIntyr's account, individuals participate in certain practices inasmuch as such activities resonate with the coherent narrative that is supposed to lead them to the *good life*. Such narratives, however, may be subject to occasional revisions themselves after, and amidst, exposure to new practices. Not all practices are reflectively opted for after all; rather, participants might simply find themselves in them without having gone through any deliberate

decision-making process. So, the relationship between partaking in practices and creating narratives mapping one's whole life, one may say, is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Such narratives are moreover made up across negotiations with others – both contemporary and past generations - and as a result, everyone is only a 'co-author' of one's own story. This implies that all three notions -practice, narrative, and tradition- stand in an intertangled network of mutual relationships.

Now, within such a context, practices grow to facilitate as well as consolidate narratives and lead one, or the society as a whole, to a good life, and this is why MacIntyre calls human actions 'enacted narratives'. But as said, relationships between practice, narrative, and tradition, are not merely unidirectional, rather they are all reciprocal, and in this sense, not only rationality and morality are tradition-constituted, but they are also *tradition-constitutive* (MacIntyre, 1988, 9).

Now, let us throw some light on one variable that so far has received little attention, yet it deserves in-depth inspection, and that is the role of artefacts in practices, narratives, and traditions. Practices after all rest upon engagements with artefacts, as there is barely, if ever, any practice where there is no artefact involved. Artefacts are all around, and as Ihde has rightly emphasized, our relation to the world is, for the most part, a *human-technology-world* relationship (Ihde, 1990, 2009). In Olsen's cogent words, 'try to bike without a bike … try to think of your day-to-day practices without things', so you will soon realize how 'our daily lives are increasingly prescribed, defined and disciplined, as well as helped or encouraged by networks of material agents' (Olsen, 2008, p. 97).

The reliance of practices upon artefacts, in conjunction with the core insight of postphenomenology to the effect that artefacts always mediate in one way or another the human-world relationship, gives rise to the idea that artefact should occupy a constitutive status within practices, but they may also have a bearing on both narratives and traditions. To keep the argument as clear as possible, I will make my case while examining a specific kind of practice, namely calligraphy, as practiced in Islamic territories. So, a preparatory step is in order.

Even though there has long been a well-established culture of 'secular calligraphy' within the Islamic world, serving areas as diverse as 'manuscript writing, street sign design, illumination, document writing, architectural design, home decor, or journalism' (Suit, 2020, p. 38), there arose as much early also a *sacred* counterpart of calligraphy practiced in religious contexts, especially scribing to the Quranic verses. Sacred calligraphy has purported to yield threefold purposes; functional (translating an auditory message, that's is, revelation exposed to the prophet, into text), aesthetic (beautification of a text), and religious (transmitting God's decrees). As a true instance of MacIntyrian practice, calligraphy, like any other practice, encompasses a whole baggage of components, ranging from, a socially established activity, coherency, a community of practitioners, standards of excellence, rules and training, internal and external goods, and so on. But moreover, there are also a number of essential artefacts involved, such as the substrate on which the content is written down (papyrus, parchment, paper), ink, but also reed pens that will capture my attention the most in the following.

Reed pens (*qalam*) are integral to calligraphy insomuch as their physical characteristics have long been a decisive factor in promulgating standards of excellence or aesthetics in performing calligraphy (figure 1). For instance, 'the [proper] size and shape of letters could be measured by the number and relative positions of hypothetical dots made by the nib of a pen' (Suit, 2020, p. 43), as in, say, *alef*, the first letter of the Persian and Arabic alphabet [see below, also the second letter], the length of the letter 'should be no longer or shorter than five measures of the pen's nib' (Suit 2020: 43). Therefore, as is clear in the figure2, 'the height, length, and concavity of individual letters are all measured against the backdrop of the pen's characteristics' (Osborn 2017: 34).

Figure 1. Different sizes of reed pens.

Figure 2. The first and second letters of the Persian and Arabic alphabet.

It follows that to imbibe standards of calligraphy, the artists' aesthetic imagination is certainly called for, but perhaps more importantly, they are distilled through the existing 'tools and materials' inherent to the practice. This reciprocity between the physical properties of *qalams* and standards of the practice very much underlies the ground for the relative stability as well as the sustainability of the Islamic calligraphy across time and space, despite historical modifications in many regards (Osborn, 2017, p. 3). This sustainability arises partly from material conditions of the figuring *qalams*, as it structures, though do not predetermine, a specific pattern of behaviour, while discouraging others. So, as long as similar reed pens are in place -the bodily or otherwise- behaviour, but also standards, remain rather stable. Let's dwell on the effects of the materiality of *qalams* on embodiment for a moment and explore what calligraphs' embodied engagements might imply in turn.

Reed pens call, facilitate, and enforce certain kinds of bodily comportments, so accordingly alternatives are precluded or discouraged. Depending on the size of both the trunk and the nib of the *qalam*, how it is shaved, style of writing, fonts, size and texture of the sheet, specificities of the ink, and other material conditions, certain embodiments may arise. For example, the material traits of *qalams* are a predictive factors of the pace at which a hand can perform writing. Smaller pens imply a smaller 'range/span of hand movement', and this, in turn, gives rise to faster writing (Meidani 2019). Moreover, 'different sizes of pen afford different properties that cause differences in performance and subsequently endow different senses and attitudes to the given text' (Meidani 2019)

Speedy writing mattered in administrative circumstances especially prior to the commencement of printing technologies. Subsequently, some attempts were made to increase the rate of the number of words a hand could accommodate. As Meidani 2019 recounts, 'the tiniest size' of the pen, could

express senses such as freedom/ liberation, dynamism, irregularity, and humor toward the presented text. In contrast, as much as the size of the cross-section in the pen becomes larger, the dynamism and movements in the calligraphic forms decrease, while the firmness, seriousness, legibility, and strictness increase (Meidani 2019).

Not just the size of the pen or its nib though, but many other physical properties also played a role in structuring the embodiment. For instance, Kalhor, a towering calligraph figure, increased the tilt or deviation of the tip of *qalams*, and accordingly steepened the angle of the nib, to allow for speedy writing (Amirkhani 1989; Foradi 1989).

There are a whole lot of nuanced details on, say, how to hold the reed pen, how to pressure it against the paper, the angle between hand and paper, how to sit, breath, and so many others, with which dealing is exceeds the purpose of the current presentation. So, let us move on to and explore another aspect of embodiment.

In her anthropological study, Suit becomes intrigued by the bodily behaviour of calligraphers scribing the Quran where 'his body and hands move in slow motion as if the letters flowed from within him, through his arm and hand down to the board. His body seemed to remember not only each letter but also the motion that produced it'[2] (Suit, 2020, p.42).

Embodiment is not obviously cashed out merely in physiological terms and has a strong bearing on character traits, feelings, perceptions, behaviour, and beliefs. To begin delving deeper, let us notice Morgan's remarks that,

> the physical characteristics of things and bodily practices enable thought and feeling … they perform the cognitive aspect of religions … Practice is not simply the expression of ideas but often their very origin. Belief often comes after practice, not only before it. The act of doing or performing religions creates a reality for them, a perceived necessity around which human values take shape (Morgan, 2021, p. 77).

Moreover, repetitive bodily comportments may fertilize certain habits, and habits could in turn cultivate certain character traits. That embodied engagement with material artefacts may give rise to certain character traits, seems fairly uncontroversial today. Waelbers (2011) notices how a type of design of vacuum cleaner might give rise to cultivating sexist assumptions. Vacuums may be designed in a way, say, whose tubes are short, and admittedly convenient for women, yet uncomfortable for men, leading to back pain inflicted by the need to overbend. This in turn may lead to giving up cleaning, and as a result, after a long period of taking up this lifestyle, such mindset as 'house tidying is women's duty' might be reinforced.

Yet, while Morgan's as well as Waelbers' argument sounds rather well-founded, a question might arise nevertheless, as to, how an otherwise profane qalam could exert also religious mediation. This once more hints at Ihde's notion of *multi-stability*. To address this quandary, I suggest, adopting the second tenet of MacIntyre's thought, namely his conception of *narrative*.

The notion of *narrative* plays three predominant roles, one might say; first, it makes participation within a particular practice intelligible. As MacIntyre writes, 'I can only answer the question, "What must I do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"' (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 205). So, what grants behaviours the significance that they possess, is of course their immediate results, but also, and perhaps more importantly, depends on how they fit in within one's story of life. This has also a further implication, and that is the fact that the very same behaviour may have different meanings within different narratives. Second, narrative also unifies discrete practices one engages in, and therefore, it introduces harmony to one's otherwise fragmentary life. Narrative, more precisely, sets up a

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[2] There is an echo of Merleau-Ponty here. For more, about embodied perception see Merleau-Ponty 2012

final end towards which all practices are oriented. Third, it moreover connects one's private life to the larger context within which one's life flows, and as a result, the notion of narrative situates a practice within society, history, and tradition. Narrative, in this sense, serves as the thread around which all parts of society organize their lives. Thus pictured, the notion of narrative will help us, I suggest, shine further light on the *multi-stability* of reed pens in calligraphy.

From the very outset, calligraphy has been granted a special status in the Islamic world. Not just because the dissemination of knowledge per se was highly respected, nor even merely because of the growing need for formal and administrative writings in later ages, but also because of the significance of scribing Scripture. The Quran, as the utmost sacred text in Islam, is not primarily a text, theologically speaking, it is rather God's revelation at some point exposed to the prophet. It is only after writing God's oral message down and turning it into *mushaf* that the sacred text of Muslims is generated. So, as one may guess, writing, thought of as the ambition of transforming the revelation into words, should have been a blessing. Scripture moreover should be written beautifully. There are several hints in religious texts recommending pleasant writing, as for instance a saying transmitted from *Ali ibn Abi Talib*, the first *Shia imam*, goes that 'the beauty of writing is the tongue of the hand and the elegance of thought' (Nasr, 1987).

So, sacred calligraphy comes into existence within such an aura of spirituality, and accordingly, sacred calligraphers often narrate their lives in the backdrop of such a historical context. For them, practicing calligraphy is indeed participation in the experience of materializing the prophet's revelation. Moreover, performing calligraphy, as the notion of narrative implies, synergizes all other practices one participates in, that is, constructing all fragments of one's life into a coherent whole that leads the calligrapher, so is presumed, to a good life.

But let's dig a little deeper and explore how reed pens, in particular, might play out within this narrative. To begin, there are hints here and there in religious sources at the role of reed pens. The term of *al-Qalam* for instance is explicitly referred to, in the Quranic text, and even there is a specific chapter (*Surah al-qalam*) titled so. In sayings of saints and other leading religious figures alike there are frequent references to the reed pen; for many of them, 'The Pen or Qalam is the Active Pole of Divine Creation', as Nasr notices (Nasr, 1987, p. 21). The *qalam* with which the human hand writes,

> is a direct symbol of that Divine Qalam and the calligraphy it traces on paper or parchment an image of that Divine Calligraphy which has written the very reality of all things upon the pages of the cosmic book (Nasr, 1987, p. 21).

So, as is clear, there is a long history of accumulated wisdom behind religious calligraphy, and in particular, the role of *qalam* and the significance which Muslim calligraphers tap into while creating their narrative. In light of such history, the calligrapher, holding the *qalam*,

> becomes himself the pen in the hands of the Divine Artist … Moreover, when he actually produces calligraphy in such a state, the pen in his hand becomes like his own being an instrument in the 'hand of God' (Nasr, 1987, p. 24).

So, *qalam*, receives the significance it has against, and thanks to, such a storytelling. But laying out narrative in this way alludes at the same time to the last MacIntyrian notion, tradition. Narrative is fundamentally anchored in tradition, as MacIntyre illuminates, and the calligrapher's narrative, as is clear from what has been said so far, relies on a backdrop of long and collective experience.

But leaving aside all sociopolitical or otherwise theological debates about tradition, more pertinent for our discussion is here the materiality of *qalam* to see how it plays a role in embedding a calligrapher in tradition. In effect, without materiality and a certain type of

embodiment, one can hardly, if ever, create a narrative that resonates with a specific tradition. Materiality as well as embodiment are the building blocks that constitute an otherwise abstract tradition. So, let's think for a moment about how an artefact could contribute to the stabilization of a tradition, and therefore how the embodiment taking shape around an artefact could tie a practitioner to the tradition.

As articulated, artifacts provide certain affordances while ruling out other paths, and in this way, they mediate human behaviour. More precisely, while they do not determine the prospective bodily behaviour, they nevertheless take users very much on certain routes rather than others. That implies, as long as individuals use rather the same artefact, there is a great chance that they exhibit more or less similar bodily comportment, and thus, artefacts in this sense harmonize users by calling for specific embodied behaviour.

Zahavi notes that there are typically 'general demands made by custom and tradition' one is born into and habituated to follow. But more pertinent is the insight that such demands are often promulgated through artefacts. So, quoting Husserl that, '"one" holds the fork in such and such a way' (Zahavi, 2003), Zahavi tries to ground his claim. It follows that, as long as individuals use forks with almost the same design, they would likely behave similarly to one another -both contemporary and past generations. The same applies to *qalams*. Alongside *qalam*'s role in performing calligraphy, and therefore its role in enforcing the standards of calligraphy, here arises another dimension of *qalam*'s role, and that is its critical status in harmonizing individuals 'behaviours as well as sustaining traditions, given that it administers how should 'I participate in a communal tradition' (Zahavi, 2003).

Exactly here lies how artefacts intersect with practice, narrative, and tradition, and how, in particular, practices, evolving through certain embodiment and around certain artefacts, could be said to be embedded within the tradition.

After observing calligraphers, Suit recounts that,

> 'Handwriting the Qur'anic text was a technique of the body combined with spiritual training. Religious education intersected here with bodily exercises that included hand-eye coordination and a breathing rhythm that corresponded with the movement of the pen. Writing the text of the Qur'an was not only a profession but also a pious act that brought the writer personal blessings (Suit 2020: 42).

So, in the light of what has been laid out so far, a *qalam*, plays various roles in calligraphy and accordingly mediates calligraphers in a variety of ways. First, by virtue of its physical characteristics, it partly promotes and impels the standards of excellence in calligraphy. Second, it arouses certain embodiment in the calligrapher. Third, it may cultivate certain character traits in calligraphers, either through mediation of the bodily comportments (e.g. the inherent slowness of calligraphical writing might foster a sort of deliberative and mindful character), or through exerting symbolic influence. As Morgan writes, 'a religious artifact … [is] more than this or that object' (Morgan, 2021, p. 3), it always transcends its functionality. Transcending its physicality, I suggested, is made possible by virtue of the respective narrative that links up a practitioner to a long tradition of sacred calligraphy. But this tie to the tradition, I argued moreover, is not merely discursive, rather the calligrapher's *qalam* has a great deal of bearing on this link to, and accordingly the continuation of, the tradition of sacred calligraphy, as it mediates how practitioners should behave. In this sense, sacred calligraphy, and therefore the emergence of sacred *qalams*, is partially indebted to the long history of designing consistent *qalams.*

Religious calligraphy cannot simply reduce to its functional aspects, as calligraphers see 'practicing calligraphy not only as a skill but also as a moral force shaping individual values' (Suit 2020: 39). So, calligraphy is, in essence, attending 'a lesson in religious ethics' (Suit 2020: 52) or

engaging oneself in 'piety and wonder' (Suit 2020: 42). This underpins why 'no one could practice calligraphy properly without being immersed in "the study of Qur'anic writing"'(Suit 2020: 53). This is in this spirit that a religious variation of *qalams* emerges[3].

4 CLOSING REMARKS

Artefacts have different meanings, functions, significances, and stabilities, in different contexts, but the range of variations they take on is not unfettered, since their materiality restricts possible affordances. Equally important is that such *multi-stable* artefacts are not neutral and exert power on users, and in this sense, individuals' perceptions, as well as behaviours, are often mediated by artefacts. These two remarks in conjunction warrant the claim that depending on the type of stabilities an artefact comes up with, varying categories of mediation might be exerted.

In this article, I tried to throw some light on the notion of *multi-stability* and see how a certain variation of a given artefact emerges in any given circumstance. Postphenomenology is for the large part obsessed with the current affordance of a piece of technology and so it is not so much in pursuit of tracking the path leading to the emergence of current variation[4]. So, I suggested drawing from MacIntyre's views on rationality – theoretical and practical - and accordingly his notions of *practice, narrative*, and *tradition*, to bring into light what pattern the process of stabilization of an artefact follows. So, I suggested that one particular stability emerges at a given moment based on the specificities of the practice within which the artefact is being utilized, but it also has a great deal to do with how participants narrate their life stories. Moreover, I argued, the stabilization of artefacts also has a bearing on how one's narrative assimilates into others', and how, as a result, one negotiates with a tradition that grounds that practice. This negotiation however, I argued, is not merely discursive, since what facilitates the integration of one's narrative into the broader context of tradition is also the artefact around which the practice has long been performed. Put simply, the materiality of the calligrapher's *qalam* links him to the tradition.

Artefacts become stabilized based on the existing *practice, narrative*, and *tradition* at any given moment, so, insofar as these latter variables remain the same, mediation exerted by a given artefact is similar. As a result, practitioners' mediated behaviours are, to a significant degree, harmonized, and therefore alike. A religious practice under relevant narrative and tradition cultivates a religious variation of the artefact, but in turn, the emerging sacred artefact mediates practitioners religiously.

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[3] Even though this article focuses predominantly on the *religious* variation of reed pens one could also anticipate how tracking the same practice, namely calligraphy, yet in diverging narratives and traditions, say, documenting administrative contents, could give rise to a *secular* variation of reed pens.
[4] For alternative developments of the notion of multistability see (de Boer 2023; Rosenberger 2014; 2017; Whyte 2015)

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest.

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