

Rationality and Its Limits in Addressing Identity and Heritage in the Thought of Zaki Naguib Mahmoud

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Abstract:

This study offers a critical reading of Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's intellectual project by examining the extent to which his later reflections on identity and heritage remained consistent with the rational foundations he explicitly endorsed in his earlier philosophical writings. It is based on the hypothesis that the central difficulty in his project did not emerge at the level of abstract principles but rather at the level of application, where maintaining the same degree of rational rigor proved more problematic when addressing issues of cultural belonging and civilizational identity. Employing a critical textual analysis of Mahmoud's writings on identity, heritage, and Western civilization, the study argues that, despite moderating the strict verificationism of his positivist phase, he did not adopt explicit methodologies drawn from the contemporary human sciences. Instead, his engagement with heritage remained largely reflective rather than methodologically structured, making it closer to philosophical appraisal than to systematic analytical inquiry. Consequently, a noticeable tension emerged between Mahmoud's commitment to rationality as a methodological ideal and its actual application in his treatment of identity and heritage.

Keywords: Zaki Naguib Mahmoud; Rationality; Logical Positivism; Identity; Heritage; Arab Reason; Contemporary Arab Thought.

1. Introduction

Zaki Naguib Mahmoud is widely regarded as one of the most influential philosophers in modern Arab thought. From his earliest writings, he became closely associated with the defense of reason and the scientific method, particularly through his adoption of logical positivism and his attempt to purge philosophical thought of metaphysical speculation and conceptual ambiguity. In the later stages of his intellectual development, however, his attention shifted toward questions of identity, renewal, underdevelopment, and cultural reform. These issues were approached through a mode of reflection closer to literary philosophy and value-oriented analysis than to strict epistemological inquiry. This shift raises a legitimate question concerning the continuity of methodological rationality within his intellectual project and the limits of its application across its different stages.

The purpose of this study is not to question Mahmoud's commitment to rationality as a matter of principle. Rather, it seeks to examine how rationality operated within his intellectual project and whether it maintained the same epistemological rigor when it moved from the analysis of knowledge to the critique of culture and society.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following central question:

To what extent did Zaki Naguib Mahmoud remain committed to rationality as a comprehensive methodological framework throughout his intellectual project? Was this rationality applied with the same degree of rigor across the various themes he addressed, or did it encounter methodological and cultural limitations when dealing with issues of identity, values, renewal, and underdevelopment?

2. The Rational Foundations of Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's Intellectual Project

In its formative phase, Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's intellectual project was grounded in a clear commitment to rationality as an epistemological method rather than merely a cultural or ethical position. This commitment is most evident in his adoption of logical positivism, as reflected in *Positive Logic* and *The Myth of Metaphysics*. Through these works, he sought to reconstruct philosophical thought on the basis of logical and linguistic analysis, linking meaning to the possibility of verification or rigorous analytical examination.

Within this framework, rationality was not conceived simply as a defense of reason. Rather, it functioned as a criterion of meaning and knowledge. A philosophical proposition possessed value only insofar as it could be subjected to logical analysis or reduced to empirically examinable data. It was from this perspective that Mahmoud launched his well-known critique of metaphysics, which he regarded as a form of discourse lacking cognitive significance and contributing more to obscurity than to the production of clear knowledge.

The intensity of Mahmoud's commitment to the scientific outlook is evident in his own words: "I am a believer in science and a disbeliever in this idle talk that benefits neither its advocates nor humanity." He further declared that logical positivism represented the philosophical doctrine most compatible with the scientific spirit and that he therefore embraced it with complete confidence in its validity (Mahmoud, 1951, Preface, p. h).

Mahmoud's logical positivist orientation rested upon a decisive principle known as the criterion of meaning, which he systematically developed in *Positive Logic*. This principle served as the boundary separating meaningful knowledge from mere verbal expressions devoid of cognitive content. According to this criterion, a proposition is meaningful only if it is either empirically verifiable or analytically true by definition, as in logic and mathematics. Propositions falling outside these two categories are not rejected as false; rather, they are excluded as cognitively meaningless. As Mahmoud argued, such statements do not even rise to the level of falsehood.

By shifting the criterion of evaluation from truth and falsity to meaning and meaninglessness, Mahmoud fundamentally redefined the function of philosophy. Philosophy was no longer conceived as an inquiry into the nature of reality or transcendent truths beyond experience. Instead, it became an analysis of the language through which knowledge is formulated. This position reflected a clear epistemological ambition: to subject thought to the requirements of scientific clarity and to liberate it from claims that resist examination and precise determination. Consequently, the criterion of meaning became the cornerstone of his conception of rationality during this period.

The epistemological framework of logical positivism is founded upon a strict distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. Analytic propositions derive their truth solely from the meanings of their constituent terms and therefore contribute nothing new to our knowledge of reality. Logical and mathematical statements constitute the paradigmatic examples of this category, since their truth is guaranteed by definition and their negation entails contradiction. Synthetic propositions, by contrast, depend for their truth or falsity upon sensory experience and empirical observation because they provide information about the external world and are therefore subject to empirical verification.

Mahmoud explicitly adopted this distinction during his positivist phase, arguing that it exhausted the entire domain of meaningful discourse. Genuine knowledge was therefore confined either to formal logical analysis or to empirical reports concerning reality. Any proposition that belonged to neither

category—including metaphysical claims and moral judgments expressed in absolute terms—could not properly be described as true or false. Rather, it was regarded as cognitively meaningless because it was neither analytically definitional nor empirically verifiable. This distinction consequently became a central instrument within Mahmoud's critical project, enabling him to redefine the boundaries of legitimate knowledge and restrict them to what could be justified logically or verified scientifically.

A significant development, however, occurred in Mahmoud's attitude toward the strict application of the verification principle. Directly or indirectly, he appears to have been influenced by the wave of criticism directed against logical positivism, particularly the critique advanced by Karl Popper. Popper argued that the principle of verification, in its strict formulation, suffers from excessive formalism and cannot even be consistently applied to scientific laws themselves, since such laws can never be conclusively verified but remain open to falsification. Popper further demonstrated that metaphysical ideas, despite their non-empirical character, have often played an important role in the advancement of science by providing theoretical frameworks and guiding research programs. As he famously observed, metaphysical ideas have illuminated the path of scientific inquiry from Thales to Einstein and from ancient atomism to modern field theories (Popper, 1986, p. 57).

In light of these criticisms, it becomes understandable that Mahmoud gradually softened his earlier position, which had excluded metaphysics altogether, and later acknowledged its value when it performed an analytical or heuristic function in relation to science. This shift may be interpreted as a response to the broader movement within contemporary philosophy away from the rigid positivist model toward more flexible criteria capable of accommodating a wider theoretical role for philosophy without abandoning the ideal of rationality. As Mahmoud himself later wrote, “Speculative metaphysics is acceptable if it confines itself to constructing a theoretical framework by positing an initial premise and deriving conclusions from it, thereby producing a coherent structure analogous to mathematical systems” (Mahmoud, 1993, Preface, p. z).

One criticism that may nevertheless be directed at Mahmoud concerns his limited explicit acknowledgment of the intellectual transformations that occurred throughout his philosophical career. A genuine scientific attitude requires openness regarding the revision of one's earlier positions, even when those positions later prove inadequate. Such acknowledgment appears only rarely in Mahmoud's writings. One example can be found in his retrospective comments on *The Myth of Metaphysics*, where he observed that enough time had passed for the work to be preserved as a document bearing witness to the author's thought and style of expression during an early stage of his intellectual development (Mahmoud, 1993, Preface, p. d). This statement constitutes a rare and indirect recognition of the limitations of some of his youthful views.

It may therefore be argued that Mahmoud did not remain confined within the rigid framework of verificationism that characterized his earliest positivist writings. Rather, he gradually expanded the role of philosophical analysis under the influence of developments within analytic philosophy itself. In later editions of *The Myth of Metaphysics*, republished under the title *A Position on Metaphysics*, metaphysics was no longer dismissed as mere meaningless discourse. Instead, Mahmoud accepted forms of metaphysical reflection grounded in systematic logical analysis or connected to the conceptual examination of scientific theories and problems. This transformation reflects a shift from a narrow understanding of meaning based on direct empirical verification to a broader conception that recognizes the epistemic value of conceptual analysis. Yet this modification did not amount to an abandonment of rationality. Rather, it represented an internal correction prompted by the limitations of the original

positivist framework. The change therefore constitutes an epistemological revision within the horizon of rationality itself, through which Mahmoud retained his commitment to clarity and analysis while abandoning the reductionist tendencies that had characterized his earliest phase.

3. The Limits of Rationality in Addressing Questions of Identity and Heritage

The deeper difficulty within Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's intellectual project does not arise from the partial revisions he introduced to some of his theoretical positions. Rather, it becomes evident in the nature of his transition from one field of inquiry to another. While the early phase of his work demonstrated a clear commitment to the spirit of critical rationality, characterized by analysis, distinction, and methodological rigor, this same spirit did not retain an equivalent degree of presence when he turned to questions of heritage and identity. At this level, critical reason no longer exercised its analytical and deconstructive function with the same intensity. Instead, it gradually moved toward positions that were closer to justification than analysis and closer to affirmation than critical examination. The paradox of Mahmoud's project therefore lies not in the diversity of its concerns, but in the discrepancy between the rigor of the rational method with which it began and the cultural framework to which it ultimately arrived. This raises the question of whether he succeeded in preserving rational consistency when moving from the critique of knowledge to the defense of cultural identity.

3.1 The Paradox of Permanence and Change in the Concept of Identity

Mahmoud argued that one of the defining characteristics of Arab-Islamic identity is the doctrine of divine unity (*tawhīd*), which divides existence into the duality of Creator and creation. In his view, this distinction is deeply rooted in Arab-Islamic culture: “The first characteristic that comes to mind is the Arab's firm belief in two levels of existence that can never be confused: the divine Creator and the world of created beings” (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 240).

From this foundational principle, Mahmoud derived several additional characteristics. The first concerns cognition, namely the Arab tendency to privilege universals over particulars and forms over individual instances, evaluating concrete realities in light of their ideal counterparts (Mahmoud, 1992, p. 409). The second is the belief that authentic civilization must be organized around moral values (Mahmoud, n.d.-b, p. 276). The third characteristic is associated with the Arabic language itself and the Arab inclination toward semantic condensation and brevity (Mahmoud, 1981, p. 124). The fourth concerns artistic expression, where Arab artists allegedly favor abstraction and the omission of detail, producing representations that evoke objects rather than reproduce them in their concrete individuality (Mahmoud, 1981, p. 123).

Taken together, these four characteristics constitute, for Mahmoud, the essential structure of Arab-Islamic identity and distinguish it from other cultural formations.

According to this perspective, Arab-Islamic culture is grounded in a dualistic vision of existence derived from Islamic doctrine. It is based on a sharp distinction between God and the world, between the absolute and the contingent, such that God represents the permanent essence while the world remains a changing and transient reality. This duality, in Mahmoud's view, shapes the Arab understanding of both self and cosmos.

Such a conception, however, appears limited by its reduction of Arab identity to only four defining characteristics. Identity cannot be adequately explained solely in religious, moral, linguistic, aesthetic, or intellectual terms. It also encompasses social and historical dimensions, including tribal and urban relationships, collective historical experience, political institutions, nationalist movements, economic

structures, everyday patterns of life, regional traditions, local dialects, and the ongoing interaction with other cultures. By overlooking these dimensions, Mahmoud's account tends toward an idealized and abstract conception that fails to reflect the complexity and dynamism of Arab societies.

Moreover, Mahmoud did not merely reduce identity to a limited set of characteristics; he also regarded these characteristics as enduring and essentially immutable. As he argued, Arabism is fundamentally a cultural rather than a political condition: a deeply embedded cultural reality from which the Arab individual cannot easily detach himself (Mahmoud, 1981, p. 120). Elsewhere, he distinguished between permanent foundations and changing branches, maintaining that while historical circumstances may evolve, the essential foundations of collective identity remain constant (Mahmoud, 1982, p. 75).

To illustrate this view, Mahmoud employed several analogies. In one example, identity is compared to a piece of gold that may be shaped into different forms while retaining its underlying substance (Mahmoud, 1982, p. 75). In another, he invokes the image of a boat whose planks are gradually replaced over time. Although every individual component changes, the vessel remains the same because its structural form persists (Mahmoud, 1990, p. 7). Later, he compares national identity to personal identity, arguing that despite the profound transformations individuals undergo throughout their lives, they continue to be recognized as the same persons (Mahmoud, 1990, p. 348).

Despite their rhetorical appeal, these analogies reveal significant methodological weaknesses. They presuppose the existence of a stable essence underlying identity without providing historical or sociological evidence for such an assumption. Moreover, the analogies themselves point in different directions. The example of gold suggests permanence of substance despite changing form, whereas the example of the boat implies permanence of form despite changing substance. This inconsistency weakens the logical foundation of the argument. Furthermore, the analogy between personal identity and collective identity overlooks important differences between the two phenomena. Personal identity rests upon biological and psychological continuity, whereas national identity is a historically constructed and socially mediated phenomenon shaped by multiple and changing factors.

Consequently, Mahmoud's attempt to reconcile permanence and change ultimately results in a synthetic formula that appears more rhetorical than analytical. Rather than emerging from a neutral investigation, it reflects a prior commitment to the permanence of identity as a philosophical assumption.

3.2 Linguistic Determinism and the Problem of Arab Reason

Mahmoud maintained that “the spirit of a language guides one to the philosophy of its speakers” (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 231), and even argued that “the characteristics of a language are themselves the characteristics of its speakers” (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 268). On this basis, he sought to establish a close relationship between the Arabic language and the cognitive and existential outlook of Arab culture.

According to Mahmoud, Arabic is characterized primarily by brevity and abstraction. The Arab preference for concise expression reflects, in his view, a broader intellectual tendency toward general principles rather than particular details. Hence the Arab appreciation for proverbs and condensed forms of wisdom (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 123). Mahmoud further suggests that this tendency corresponds to a deeper conception of existence, rooted in an intellectual disposition that privileges abstract generalities over individual particulars, making them easier to retain and transmit across space and time (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 123).

A possible objection concerns literary genres such as the novel and drama, which often involve considerable elaboration and detail. Mahmoud responds by arguing that these genres are relatively recent

additions to Arab culture and therefore do not represent its authentic linguistic character (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 124).

From this perspective, Arabic possesses two defining characteristics: brevity and abstraction. As an illustration of abstraction, Mahmoud argues that classical Arabic love poetry often addresses an idealized type of woman rather than a specific individual. Similar patterns, he suggests, can be found in descriptions of horses, camels, and other objects commonly depicted in Arabic literature (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 124).

This interpretation reveals a reductionist tendency that generalizes limited literary characteristics to the Arabic language as a whole. Mahmoud's argument concerning abstraction relies heavily on selected examples from love poetry, yet Arabic literature also contains numerous instances of highly individualized and detailed description. Likewise, his treatment of narrative and dramatic elaboration as merely secondary developments presupposes the existence of a fixed and timeless essence of the Arabic language—an assumption that is neither historically nor linguistically demonstrated.

As a result, language is treated not as a dynamic historical phenomenon shaped by changing forms of expression, but as a static entity governed by permanent characteristics. The analysis therefore moves away from scientific inquiry toward cultural generalization, relying on limited literary examples to support broad conclusions concerning the nature of language and, by extension, the nature of Arab reason. This significantly weakens the methodological foundation of Mahmoud's conclusions in this area.

3.3 Rehabilitating the Sufi Heritage

Mahmoud maintained that the Arab-Islamic mind did not remain static throughout its history but rather passed through successive stages of growth and maturation that differed in their degrees of clarity and cognitive sophistication. He derived this interpretation from Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's exegesis of the Qur'anic Verse of Light (Qur'an 24:35), as presented in *Mishkat al-Anwar*. According to al-Ghazali's interpretation, the successive symbols of the niche, lamp, glass, shining star, and blessed tree represent ascending levels of cognition. Mahmoud adopted this symbolic scheme and transformed it into a model for understanding the historical development of Arab reason.

According to this interpretation, the niche represents sensory perception, the lamp symbolizes the intellect's ability to construct meanings from sensory data, the glass signifies the clarification and refinement of those meanings, the shining star represents the highest degree of intellectual brilliance, and the blessed tree symbolizes a form of inner mystical perception (Mahmoud, n.d.-a, p. 214).

On this basis, Mahmoud divided the development of Arab reason into four major stages. The first is a stage of immediate and intuitive perception associated with the early practical concerns of the Islamic community. The second is a stage of organized rational cognition, marked by the flourishing of linguistic studies and speculative theology. The third represents the peak of intellectual maturity, exemplified by the achievements of philosophy, literature, and science during the Abbasid period through thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Al-Jahiz. Finally, the fourth stage is that of mystical cognition, represented by Al-Ghazali, in which reason ascends to a form of inner knowledge that transcends purely analytical thought. Mahmoud thus concludes that the development of Arab reason constitutes an ascending movement toward increasingly elevated forms of cognition, culminating in the mystical experience, which he regards as the highest form of epistemic awareness (Mahmoud, 1993, pp. 203–209).

The methodological weakness of this interpretation lies in its projection of a mystical-religious framework onto a historical and cultural phenomenon. By relying on Al-Ghazali's symbolic

interpretation of the Verse of Light and transforming it into a model for the evolution of Arab reason, Mahmoud conflates two fundamentally distinct domains. The Qur'anic text and its mystical interpretation concern stages of individual spiritual perception rather than the historical development of an entire civilization's intellectual life. Consequently, transforming symbolic religious imagery into a general law of historical development constitutes an unsubstantiated generalization lacking the empirical and analytical foundations required for historical inquiry.

Moreover, this framework appears to be constructed theoretically in advance and then imposed selectively upon history. This is evident in Mahmoud's choice of particular individuals and events to represent each stage of development. Figures such as Ali ibn Abi Talib, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Sina are assigned symbolic roles within the scheme without a clearly articulated methodological justification explaining why these figures, rather than others, should be regarded as representative of the respective stages. The classification therefore appears less the result of systematic historical investigation than of philosophical interpretation.

More importantly, Mahmoud's treatment of the mystical stage as the highest form of intellectual development introduces a significant methodological paradox. It elevates a non-rational mode of cognition above rational cognition itself, thereby conflicting with the scientific and rational standards that Mahmoud had defended during his positivist phase, standards grounded in the primacy of reason and logical analysis. As a result, his interpretation shifts from objective analysis to symbolic speculation and becomes closer to a philosophical meditation than to a scientific study of the history of Arab reason. This reveals a clear retreat from the methodological rigor that Mahmoud himself had previously advocated and reflects a form of ideological projection onto historical experience.

3.4 Between Admiration and Rejection: The Dialectic of Engagement with Western Civilization

Reflecting on his earlier attitude toward Western civilization, Mahmoud acknowledged:

“During those years, I did not distinguish between what could legitimately be borrowed from the West and what could not. Everything they possessed seemed worthy of imitation. We should eat as they eat, write from left to right as they write, and wear the clothes they wear” (Mahmoud, n.d.-a, p. 73).

This admission reveals another dimension of the limitations within Mahmoud's intellectual project. The problem here does not lie in rejection motivated by hostility but rather in acceptance motivated by admiration. Such a position does not reflect a critically informed engagement with Western civilization. Instead, it expresses a generalized tendency that erases the distinction between objective scientific achievements that can be rationally appropriated and cultural practices that are historically contingent and context-bound.

The call to imitate the West even in the details of everyday life suggests the absence of a precise philosophical criterion capable of defining the legitimate boundaries of cultural borrowing. Modernity thus becomes a matter of external imitation rather than a rational assimilation of scientific and intellectual achievements. Mahmoud's position during this period therefore cannot be regarded as an expression of critical rationality but rather as a tendency toward comprehensive adoption. This methodological excess is no less problematic than the opposite tendency of comprehensive rejection that emerged later, since both positions reveal a lack of the critical balance necessary to distinguish between the essential achievements of a civilization and its contingent cultural manifestations.

Mahmoud later described a radically different position:

“My stance changed with the rise of the nationalist movement. Since our greatest enemy was also the bearer of the civilization described as modern, there was no alternative but to reject both together.

Consequently, I became sympathetic to those calling for a purely Arab cultural identity” (Mahmoud, n.d.-b, p. 13).

The weakness of this position lies in the fact that the shift was not driven by a critical philosophical reassessment of Western epistemological foundations or scientific methods. Rather, it was largely shaped by the circumstances of political conflict and nationalist sentiment. Acceptance and rejection were no longer governed by objective rational criteria but by contingent ideological considerations associated with the image of the “enemy” rather than with the intrinsic merit of particular ideas.

As a result, Mahmoud conflated civilization as a shared human achievement—open to adoption, criticism, and modification—with the political forces that happened to represent it at a particular historical moment. Rejecting a civilization because of political hostility toward its representatives constitutes a methodological error, since the epistemic value of an idea depends not on the identity of its producer but on its validity and effectiveness. Likewise, his advocacy of a “pure Arab cultural character” was not grounded in a systematic analysis of the structure, possibilities, and limitations of Arab culture itself. Rather, it emerged as a defensive response to a perceived cultural threat. In this way, Mahmoud moved from a critical philosophical position aimed at objectively distinguishing what should be accepted from what should be rejected to an identity-centered position shaped largely by emotional and ideological considerations.

3.5 Heritage Glorification and the Limits of Critical Consciousness

In the later phase of his intellectual development, Mahmoud increasingly adopted a position that tended toward the celebration of heritage rather than its critical examination. The question “What should we preserve and what should we abandon?” gradually lost the urgency it once possessed. Heritage came to be viewed as a rich reservoir whose elements were broadly worthy of recovery and inspiration.

This transformation is particularly evident in Mahmoud’s reassessment of Al-Ghazali. Whereas Al-Ghazali had previously been associated with a non-rational mystical orientation, Mahmoud later argued that many of his ideas could be transferred directly into contemporary life and serve as practical guidelines even under modern conditions (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 245).

According to this interpretation, the Divine Names constitute a coherent hierarchy of values that can be understood as an Islamic ethical map. Knowledge, will, creativity, mercy, and other divine attributes become ideals toward which human life should aspire (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 246).

Mahmoud further asks what is meant by “life” when individuals are called upon to take their share of it and truly become alive. His answer is that life consists fundamentally of two dimensions: awareness and action (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 247). Mere biological existence is insufficient. To be truly alive is to possess conscious awareness of oneself and one’s surroundings and to transform that awareness into purposeful action directed toward growth and self-transcendence (Mahmoud, 1993, p. 247).

Mahmoud linked the flourishing of early Arab civilization to the embodiment of these values. Contemporary decline, in his view, results not from deficiencies within the heritage itself but from the abandonment of its vital principles. The solution, therefore, lies in recovering those principles rather than subjecting the foundations of the heritage to critical scrutiny.

This approach reveals a significant transformation in Mahmoud’s attitude toward heritage. Heritage ceases to function as an object of critical selection and evaluation according to objective criteria and instead becomes an idealized entity largely immune to questioning. The past is presented as a complete and valuable legacy to be recovered rather than re-examined.

From a methodological perspective, this position carries important consequences. It effectively absolves heritage of historical responsibility for contemporary stagnation and attributes decline solely to the abandonment of authentic values rather than to possible limitations within those values themselves or to their suitability for modern conditions. Heritage thus ceases to be an object of scientific analysis and becomes an object of cultural affirmation. The solution is no longer sought in the production of new forms of knowledge but in the restoration of an earlier model.

This development marks a clear departure from Mahmoud's earlier position, in which ideas were evaluated according to standards of scientific validity and objective usefulness. In its place emerges a perspective closer to an ideological vision that presupposes the perfection of the past and interprets the present primarily as a deviation from it. Consequently, Mahmoud moves from a project of critically examining heritage to one of defending and justifying it. Instead of reconstructing heritage on modern rational foundations, he increasingly presents it as a repository of ready-made solutions. Such a position ultimately departs from the scientific spirit that requires heritage itself to be subjected to critical examination rather than accepted as inherently complete.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's intellectual project was initially grounded in a strong commitment to analytical rationality. This commitment was reflected in his defense of logical clarity, his admiration for the scientific method, and his adoption of logical positivism. Yet, despite the coherence and rigor that characterized this commitment at the theoretical level, it did not maintain the same degree of consistency when Mahmoud turned to questions of culture, heritage, and identity. At this stage, his project began to exhibit forms of methodological hesitation that produced noticeable tensions between the standards he established and the conclusions he ultimately reached.

In his treatment of identity, Mahmoud tended toward an essentialist conception that conflicts with a rational perspective requiring historical and contextual explanations of social phenomena. Likewise, his attempt to establish a direct relationship between language and the nature of Arab reason relied on broad cultural generalizations lacking a sufficiently rigorous scientific foundation. In his approach to heritage, he gradually moved from criticism toward celebration, allowing justificatory tendencies to overshadow analytical ones. A similar pattern can be observed in his attitude toward Western civilization, where he oscillated between complete admiration and cautious rejection without consistently relying on a stable critical criterion.

The fundamental difficulty in Mahmoud's project therefore does not stem from the absence of rationality as a guiding principle. Rather, it arises from the challenge of preserving the full demands of rational inquiry when confronting issues of identity, belonging, and heritage—domains in which cognitive, emotional, analytical, and normative dimensions inevitably intersect.

The enduring significance of Mahmoud's project lies not only in the conclusions it produced but also in the tensions it revealed. These tensions reflect one of the central dilemmas of contemporary Arab thought: the challenge of reconciling the demands of rationality with the pressures of cultural belonging. A final methodological observation may be added. Although Mahmoud gradually moved beyond the strict version of the verification principle when addressing questions of culture and heritage, he did not compensate for this shift through the explicit adoption of alternative methodologies drawn from the human sciences. His engagement with heritage was not systematically grounded in modern hermeneutics, historical analysis, linguistic deconstruction, or epistemological critique in the manner

later developed by major contemporary Arab thinkers such as Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, Mohammed Arkoun, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Instead, his treatment of heritage often remained closer to exposition and selective justification than to explicit methodological analysis.

This conclusion, however, should not be interpreted as a retrospective judgment that measures Mahmoud exclusively by standards developed after his time. He worked within the intellectual horizon available to him and within a historical context in which awareness of such methodologies was still emerging in contemporary Arab thought. The significance of his experience therefore lies not only in its achievements but also in what it reveals about the limits of its historical moment and the difficulties involved in moving from an abstract normative rationality to a rationality applied to the complex domains of heritage and identity.

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