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THE 19th CENTURY AND THE EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY: FROM ROMANTIC INDIVIDUALISM TO SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The 19th century represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of identity, as the Enlightenment's rational, universal self gave way to complex, relational, and socially embedded conceptions. This article traces the transformation of identity across philosophy, literature, sociology, and emerging psychology. Romantic thinkers such as Rousseau and Wordsworth emphasized emotional authenticity, while nationalist and industrial theorists including Herder, Mazzini, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel highlighted collective, class-based, and structural dimensions of selfhood. Gender theorists Wollstonecraft and Mill argued for socially constructed identities, prefiguring feminist and queer thought. Existentialist and psychological innovations by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, James, Cooley, and Freud further explored the performative, divided, and unconscious aspects of the self. By synthesizing these intellectual currents, the article demonstrates how 19th-century debates laid the groundwork for modern social and psychological theories of identity, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and social structure.

Keywords: *identity, the 19th century, self, alienation, selfhood.*

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ХІХ СТОЛІТТЯ ТА ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ: ВІД РОМАНТИЧНОГО ІНДИВІДУАЛІЗМУ ДО СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ СВІДОМОСТІ

XIX ст. – визначальний період у розвитку поняття ідентичності, коли раціональне та універсальне «Я» Просвітництва поступилося місцем складним, реляційним та соціально вбудованим концепціям самості. У статті простежується еволюція ідентичності крізь призму філософії, літератури, соціології та ранньої психології. Романтичні мислителі – Жан-Жак Руссо та Вільям Вордсворт – підкреслювали значення емоційної автентичності та внутрішньої правдивості особистості. Водночас націоналістичні та індустріальні теоретики – Йоганн Готфрід Гердер, Джузеппе Маццині, Еміль Дюркгейм, Макс Вебер і Георг Зіммель – висвітлювали колективні, класові та структурні виміри самосвідомості. Натомість гендерні філософи – Мері Воллстонкрафт і Джон Стюарт Мілль – доводили, що гендерні відмінності є соціально сконструйованими, закладаючи основу для феміністської думки. Екзистенційні та психологічні новації у студіях Сьорена К'єркегора, Фрідріха Ніцше, Вільяма Джеймса, Чарльза Гортона Кулі та Зигмунда Фройда показали, що «Я» – динамічне, багатошарове і частково несвідоме, формується через дії, внутрішні конфлікти та соціальні взаємодії.

У роботі проаналізовано, як взаємодія філософських, соціальних і психологічних концепцій у XIX ст. сформувала основу для сучасних соціально-психологічних теорій ідентичності, підкреслюючи складний зв'язок між індивідуальною автономією та соціальною структурою. Адже «Я» перестало бути заданою сутністю і стало процесом – результатом взаємодії внутрішнього досвіду, культурних норм, соціальних відносин та історичного контексту. Вивчення історії ідентичності XIX ст. дозволяє краще зрозуміти сучасні теорії самосвідомості, соціальної належності та психологічного розвитку особистості.

Ключові слова: *ідентичність, XIX ст., «Я», відчуження, самосвідомість.*

Introduction

Identity is one of the central problems of modern thought – a bridge between philosophy, psychology, and social theory. From the Enlightenment's rational individual to the Romantic soul, from the industrial worker to the psychoanalytic subject, the modern self evolved through profound crises and redefinitions. Despite its importance, there is relatively little comprehensive scholarship that traces the evolution of identity across these multiple domains in a single, cohesive narrative, particularly connecting 19th-century philosophical reflection to emerging psychological theories. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a historical and conceptual overview of identity from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century.

Thus, *the aims* of this article are:

1. To demonstrate how philosophical, literary, and social thought reshaped the notion of selfhood in the 19th century.

2. To analyze how emerging psychological theories – including introspective, social, and psychoanalytic approaches – built upon and transformed these earlier ideas.

3. To provide an integrated perspective on the interplay between individual, social, and cultural dimensions of identity, highlighting the processes by which the self became understood as relational, performative, and historically situated.

By tracing this evolution, the article clarifies why the 19th century represents a pivotal moment in the history of identity and underscores its relevance for contemporary research in psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Each intellectual movement – Romanticism, nationalism, industrial modernity, feminism, existentialism, and early psychology – contributed to this reimagining, preparing the ground for the plural, relational, and dynamic conceptions of identity that define the modern age.

Methods and Materials

The 19th century marks a turning point in the Western understanding of who we are. The confident, rational self of the Enlightenment – a self grounded in universal reason and moral autonomy – began to fracture under the pressures of industrialization, nationalism, and modern psychology. Across philosophy, literature, and social theory, identity was reimagined as emotional, social, historical, and even unconscious. The century's thinkers gradually replaced the Enlightenment's abstract, universal «man» with a multiplicity of selves: passionate, national, gendered, classed, alienated, and divided.

By century's end, identity was no longer something given by nature or God; it had become something constructed, contested, and performed – setting the stage for modern and postmodern conceptions of selfhood. What began as a philosophical question about human nature thus became an interdisciplinary exploration of how social, emotional, and symbolic forces shape the individual.

It is a well-known fact that in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Romanticism arose as both a continuation and a rebellion against the Enlightenment. While the Enlightenment had emphasized reason, science, and universality, the Romantics celebrated emotion, imagination, and individuality. Identity, for them, was not a fixed rational essence but an inner flame – authentic, dynamic, and often in conflict with the world.

Results

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing at the cusp of Romanticism, is often regarded as the progenitor of the modern self. His «Confessions» opens with a declaration that redefines selfhood in unprecedentedly personal terms: «*I am not made like any of those I have seen; I dare believe I am not made like any of those who exist*» (Rousseau, 2005, 17). For Rousseau, the truth of identity lay not in conformity to social norms or rational ideals but in emotional sincerity – the courage to express one's inner feelings against the falsity of civilization. He thus set the stage for the Romantic notion of authenticity:

to be oneself was to resist the corrupting influence of society and to remain faithful to one's inner nature.

This inner turn blossomed in William Wordsworth's «The Prelude», a long autobiographical poem that traces the «growth of a poet's mind». Wordsworth constructs identity as a continuous dialogue between memory, emotion, and the natural world: «*The mind of man is framed even like the breath and harmony of music*» (Wordsworth, 1979, 66).

The self is no longer a static entity but a process – a developmental, experiential unfolding. Similarly, Goethe's «The Sorrows of Young Werther» dramatizes the Romantic ideal of emotional authenticity, even to the point of self-destruction (Goethe, 1989). Werther's suicide, born of passionate intensity, becomes a tragic testament to the idea that to live authentically might mean to reject the very norms that sustain social existence.

Romanticism thus redefined identity as inward and emotional, locating truth not in universal rationality but in personal feeling. This was the first major step in the modern reorientation of selfhood – from the universal to the subjective. At the same time, Romanticism's emphasis on inner truth opened the path toward collective identity, as the desire for authenticity extended from the individual soul to the spirit of nations. While Romanticism exalted the individual soul, it also sowed the seeds of collective identity. The same yearning for authenticity that defined the inner self was extended to nations and peoples. Romantic thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder argued that each culture possessed its own «Volksgeist» – a unique «spirit of the people» expressed through language, art, and folklore. In «Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity», Herder writes: «*Each nation has its centre of happiness within itself, as every sphere has its centre of gravity*» (Herder, 2002, 301). Identity thus became cultural and plural: there was no single human essence, but many ways of being human, rooted in history and community. Herder's insight laid the philosophical groundwork for modern nationalism – and for the later understanding that identity is shaped by belonging, by the «we» as much as the «I.»

In the 19th century, this idea became politically potent. Giuseppe Mazzini, in «The Duties of Man», insisted that personal identity could not exist without national identity: «*Without a country you have no name, no token, no voice, no rights, no existence*» (Mazzini, 2004, 50). For Mazzini, the self's meaning derived from its participation in the collective destiny of the nation. Romantic nationalism thus transformed identity from an individual interior experience into a shared social and political one. Yet this was a double-edged sword: it fuelled both movements for liberation (Italy, Germany) and ideologies of exclusion, laying the groundwork for later racialized and imperial identities. Thus, the Romantic celebration of belonging became intertwined with the birth of modern mass politics and collective consciousness.

As Europe industrialized, identity became deeply entangled with economic and social structures. The rapid transformation of labour, the rise of the factory, and the expansion of cities produced new social classes and new forms of alienation. The self

was no longer simply emotional or national; it was now economic – defined by one's relation to production.

This reversal – that society shapes the self rather than the self shaping society – revolutionized the understanding of identity. The idea that material and social realities shape inner life became a defining revelation of the industrial age – one that later thinkers would elaborate in diverse ways. Émile Durkheim described the coercive power of social facts over individual minds (Durkheim, 2014); Max Weber saw the 'iron cage' of rationalized labour shaping personal vocation (Weber, 2005); and Georg Simmel portrayed the metropolitan individual as detached and defensive amid the flux of modern life (Simmel, 2004).

Identity here is neither divine nor autonomous but socially produced – a function of material conditions and institutional structures. Class becomes the dominant category of selfhood: to be a worker or bourgeois is not just to occupy a role but to inhabit a worldview, a consciousness. Industrial modernity thus fragments both individual and communal identity. The crowd replaces the community; alienation replaces belonging; alienation replaces belonging. Yet it also opens the way to a new understanding of identity as collective struggle – the possibility that through solidarity, individuals can transform their social being and reclaim agency. This was an early precursor to what psychology would later call social identity theory – the idea that one's sense of self derives from group membership and intergroup dynamics. In this sense, the sociology of the 19th century anticipates psychology's later turn toward the study of intergroup relations and self-concept.

While industrial and national identities reshaped the social world, another revolution in selfhood was taking place: the emergence of gender identity as a political and philosophical issue. The Enlightenment's «rational man» had always been precisely that – a man. Women, long excluded from the spheres of education, politics, and authorship, began to claim their own right to self-definition.

In «A Vindication of the Rights of Woman», Mary Wollstonecraft demanded that women be recognized as rational beings capable of moral and intellectual autonomy: «*I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves*» (Wollstonecraft, 2014, 112).

This assertion of self-possession – the right to define one's own identity – marks the birth of feminist philosophy. For Wollstonecraft, true identity was impossible without equality; social subordination distorted both women's and men's humanity.

Later in the century, John Stuart Mill's «The Subjection of Women» further challenged gendered notions of identity. Mill argued that what was called «feminine nature» was not innate but produced by social conditioning: «*What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others*» (Mill, 2007, 261).

Here we find the roots of the modern idea that identity is constructed, not natural – an idea that would echo through Simone de Beauvoir's «The Second Sex» («*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*»; Beauvoir, 2011, 283) and later feminist and queer theory.

The 19th century thus saw gender move from being a biological or moral category to a social identity, shaped by power and ideology. In linking selfhood to gender, these thinkers opened the way for psychology to examine identity as both personal experience and social construction.

By the mid to late 19th century, a new existential anxiety emerged. The modern self, freed from God and tradition, now faced a terrifying freedom – the burden of defining itself in a disenchanted world.

So, Søren Kierkegaard, often called the first existentialist, explored this crisis in «The Sickness Unto Death». For him, the self is not a substance but a relation that relates itself to itself: «*The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self... despair is the sickness unto death*» (Kierkegaard, 2004, 43).

Kierkegaard's insight is revolutionary: identity is not something we have but something we do. It is an ongoing act of self-relation – a synthesis of the finite and infinite, of necessity and freedom. Despair arises when this relation fails, when we refuse to become who we are meant to be. Identity is thus a moral and spiritual task, not a given.

In turn, Friedrich Nietzsche radicalized this further. Declaring the «death of God», Nietzsche stripped away the metaphysical foundations of selfhood and proclaimed that individuals must create their own values and identities. In «Thus Spoke Zarathustra», he commands: «*Become who you are*» (Nietzsche, 2009, 189).

Nietzsche's self is a project of self-overcoming – the Übermensch as the figure who creates meaning in a meaningless world. Yet this freedom is precarious; without divine or social anchors, identity becomes an aesthetic performance, a «mask» one must consciously craft. As he later observed in «Beyond Good and Evil», «*The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe*» (Nietzsche, 2003,153), highlighting the persistent tension between self-creation and social forces.

Nietzsche's insight – that identity is performative and creative – anticipates 20th-century psychoanalysis and postmodernism. The stable, rational subject of the Enlightenment is gone; in its place stands a self that is fluid, dynamic, and often fractured. Through Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the idea of the self moved decisively toward existential and psychological dimensions, bridging philosophy and the emerging science of the mind.

While philosophy wrestled with alienation and authenticity, psychology emerged as a new science of the self. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw thinkers like William James, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Horton Cooley transform identity into a subject of empirical and introspective study. This period marked a shift from abstract philosophical speculation to systematic observation, experiment, and theorization about the self, blending philosophical reflection with empirical investigation.

Therefore, William James, in «The Principles of Psychology», distinguished between the «I» (the self as subject) and the «Me» (the self as object of reflection). He proposed that personal identity was multifaceted – composed of the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self: «*A man has as many social selves as there are*

individuals who recognize him» (James, 1983, 294). By emphasizing the social dimension of selfhood, James highlighted that identity is not only internally constructed but also externally validated, forming through the web of social relationships and recognition.

James thus bridges philosophy and psychology, showing that identity is relational – formed through recognition by others. This insight anticipates both George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism and Henri Tajfel's later social identity theory. Moreover, James's framework allowed psychologists to operationalize identity in experimental settings, laying the groundwork for modern research on the self, social perception, and personality.

Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self made this process explicit: «*I am not who I think I am, nor who you think I am, but who I think you think I am*» (Cooley, 2018, 152). Cooley's theory underscores that identity is reflexive: individuals internalize others' perceptions, producing a dynamic feedback loop between self-conception and social appraisal. Identity becomes a mirror – a social construction reflected through interaction. This insight positions identity not as a static essence but as an ongoing, performative negotiation shaped by societal norms, expectations, and interpersonal communication.

Meanwhile, Freud's «The Interpretation of Dreams» and «The Ego and the Id» revealed that the self was not transparent even to itself. He wrote: «*The ego is not master in its own house*» (Freud, 2010, 560). The ego, driven by unconscious forces, was a fragile mediator between instinct and civilization. Freud's psychoanalysis introduced the idea that identity is layered, with desires, fears, and repressed impulses operating beneath conscious awareness, making the self a site of ongoing internal conflict. Freud's discovery of the unconscious shattered the Enlightenment ideal of rational self-mastery; identity was now layered, hidden, and conflicted. This complexity encouraged subsequent thinkers to consider identity as simultaneously social, psychic, and historical, integrating internal drives with external pressures.

Together, these thinkers ushered in a psychological modernity in which identity was understood as both intersubjective (shaped by others) and intrapersonal (divided within). By combining relational, empirical, and intrapsychic perspectives, James, Cooley, and Freud provided a conceptual foundation for 20th-century theories of personality, social psychology, and psychoanalysis, bridging the gap between philosophical reflection and scientific investigation of the self. This marks the moment when the study of identity fully entered the realm of psychology, linking philosophical questions of meaning to empirical questions of behaviour and mind (Table 1).

Table 1

From Philosophy to Psychology – The Evolution of Identity

Period / Thinker	Core Idea of Identity	Contribution to Psychology
Jean-Jacques Rousseau & Romanticism	Emotional authenticity; self as inner truth	Introduces the idea of subjective experience as core to selfhood
Johann Gottfried Herder & Giuseppe Mazzini	National and collective identity	Anticipates social belonging and group-based

		self-conception
Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel	Social structures shape individual consciousness	Precursor to sociological and social-psychological models
Mary Wollstonecraft & John Stuart Mill	Gender as socially constructed	Basis for feminist psychology and gender identity theory
Søren Kierkegaard & Friedrich Nietzsche	Existential and performative self	Influences existential psychology and psychoanalysis
William James	«I» and «Me»; multiple selves	Foundation for modern theories of self-concept
Charles Horton Cooley	Looking-glass self	Direct precursor to symbolic interactionism and social identity theory
Sigmund Freud	Unconscious and divided self	Establishes depth psychology; identity as dynamic and layered

By the early 20th century, the 19th century's revolutions in thought had utterly transformed the notion of identity. From Rousseau's emotional authenticity and Wollstonecraft's feminist autonomy to Nietzsche's creative self, identity had ceased to be an essence and had become a process – a negotiation between inner life and outer structures.

The social identity theories of the 20th century (Mead, Cooley, Tajfel) can be seen as heirs to this transformation. They translate philosophical insights into social psychology: identity is not an isolated consciousness but a network of relations, roles, and perceptions.

At the same time, psychoanalysis deepened the Romantic insight that the self is inwardly divided and emotionally driven. Existentialism and later postmodernism would push this further, presenting identity as unstable, performative, and plural – a far cry from the rational unity imagined by Descartes or Kant.

Conclusion

The 19th century is, above all, the century of becoming. It witnesses the disintegration of the stable Enlightenment subject and the emergence of multiple, intersecting identities – emotional, national, class-based, gendered, and psychological.

Where the Early Modern period saw identity as divine order, and the Enlightenment saw it as rational autonomy, the 19th century reveals it to be historical, social, and existential. The self is no longer given but made – and remade – through feeling, labour, belonging, and consciousness. In this sense, the 19th century does not merely precede the modern study of identity; it invents it. It gives us the language – of self, society, gender, and psyche – through which all later psychological and cultural theories of identity continue to speak.

The century thus stands at the crossroads of the modern human condition: a world where identity is both liberation and burden, where to «be oneself» is no longer a description but an ongoing act of creation.

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