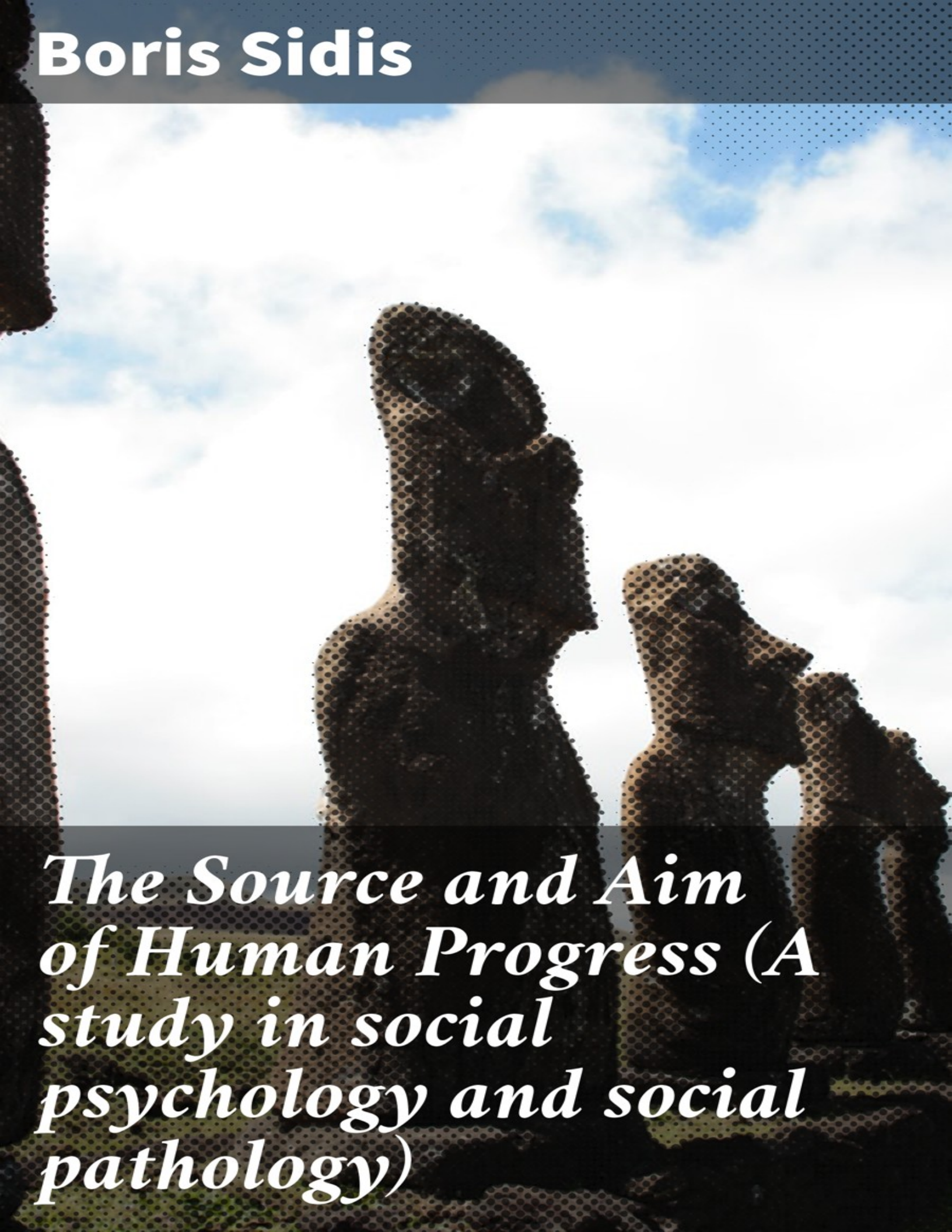
Boris Sidis



The Source and Aim of Human Progress (A study in social psychology and social pathology)

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ABOUT twenty-five years ago I published in my *Psychology of Suggestion* a series of experiments on Normal and Abnormal Suggestibility carried on at various laboratories including my own laboratory. I developed the psycho-physiological theory of the subconscious, traced the causation and nature of subconscious activities, and worked out the laws of normal and abnormal suggestibility. The following pertains to our present subject:

The nervous centers of man's nervous system, if classified as to function, may be divided into inferior and superior. The inferior centers are characterized by reflex and automatic activities. A stimulus excites the peripheral nerve-endings of some sense-organ. At once a nerve-current is set up in the afferent nerves. The current in its turn stimulates a plexus of central ganglia, the nerve energy of which is set free, and is propagated along the efferent nerves towards muscles and glands,—secretions, muscular contractions and relaxations are the result; biologically regarded, various reactions and adjustments follow.

Ingoing and outgoing nerve currents with their various end reactions may be modified by the nerve centers. Nerve currents' may be intensified, decreased in energy, or even entirely inhibited by central ganglia or by their mutual interaction and interferences. Sherrington and other physiologists have by a number of experiments formulated some of the important principles of such physiological activities. A law of inhibition or interference early formulated by Ziehen may suffice: "If an excitation of a definite intensity (*m*) take place in one cortical element (*b*), and another excitation of a different intensity take place at the

same time in another cortical element (*t*) which is connected by a path of conduction with element (*b*), the two intensities of excitation may modify each other."

Although such modifications frequently occur, it nevertheless remains true that the inferior nerve-centers are of a reflex nature. No sooner is the nerve-energy of a lower center set free than at once it tends to discharge itself into action. Thus every sensation, perception, feeling, emotion, thought, or belief, if left uncontrolled, tends to be translated into some appropriate movement, action, or reaction. The physiological process of setting free the nerve energy in a central ganglion, or in a system of central ganglia, is accompanied by activity in the simpler, but more organized, more integrated nerve centers, and by the lower psychic functions of simple sentience, sensibility; and in the more complex, but less integrated, less organized centers; by the higher psychic functions of consciousness, such as sensations, precepts, images, ideas, and emotions.

Turning now to the superior or the highest nerve-centers, we find that they are characterized by the highest mental functions, thought and reasoning, choice and will. A number of impressions, sensations and precepts reach those thought and will-centers; then a critical, a sifting, a selecting, a controlling or inhibitory process begins. Some of the mental states are modified and are permitted to develop within certain limits, others are given full play, while still others, and possibly the majority of them, are rejected and inhibited, not taking effect in reactions and adjustments to the environment.

The inhibited states belong to the great number of possible states with their reactions out of which selection is made by the critical thought and will-centers. These mental states, images, ideas, and feelings with their end-reactions, out of which selection is made, Galton aptly terms "the antechamber of consciousness." They are on the margin of consciousness, and are partly of a conscious and partly of a subconscious character. To quote from Galton: "Although the brain is able to do fair work fluently in an automatic way, and though it will of its own accord, strike out sudden and happy ideas, it is questionable if it is capable of working thoroughly and profoundly without past or present effort. The character of this effort seems to me chiefly to lie in bringing the contents of the antechamber more nearly within the ken of consciousness, which then takes comprehensive note of all its contents, and compels the logical faculty to test them *seriatim* before selecting the fittest for a summons to the presence of the chamber. The thronging of the antechamber is, I am convinced, beyond my control."

Mental activity in its rational or integrative aspects whether logical, moral, or aesthetic, is essentially selective in character. The logical process draws definite conclusions from given premises; the moral man or the ethical thinker regards definite relations in behavior response to definite relations in the environment as right or wrong; while the artist or the one who enjoys artistic work appreciates definite relations and combinations as the artistic and the beautiful. Even ordinary life where the process of selection is not so rigid as in the arts, sciences, and philosophy, still

the process of attention for the maintenance of rationality is a severe judge in the rejection of unfit streams of thoughts and ideas that may present themselves in the antechamber of consciousness, as Galton terms the state of the mind. In a train of ideas, few ideas of the total mass that offer themselves are accepted, or utilized by the guiding, controlling consciousness to acted upon in the life adjustments of the organism. This holds true not only of the material needs, but more especially of the spiritual interests of man. The higher the level of mental activity, the more finite, the more precise, the more rigid the selective process becomes. The stream of consciousness, as it rushes along, selects, synthesizes or, physiologically speaking, integrates those trains of ideas which help most effectually to reach the destination, or, in other words, are especially fit for the purpose in hand.

This selective will-activity of the highest nerve-systems, given in the will-effort of selection, forms the very nucleus of man's rational life. These superior selective "choice and will centers," localized by Ferrier, Wundt, Bianchi and others, in the frontal lobes, and by others in the upper layers of the cortex, on account of their selective and inhibitory functions, may be characterized as selective and inhibitory centers *par excellence*.

Man's nerve organization may thus be classified into two main systems: I. the inferior, including the reflex, the instinctive, the automatic centres; and II. the superior, the controlling, selective, and inhibitory brain-centres of the cortex. Parallel to the double systems of nerve-centres, we also have a double mental activity, or double-consciousness

as it is sometimes called, the inferior, the organic, the instinctive, the automatic, the reflex consciousness, or briefly termed the *subconciousness*; and the superior, the choosing, the willing; the critical, the *will-consciousness*. This controlling will-consciousness may also be characterized as the guardian-consciousness of the species and of the individual.

From an evolutionary, or teleological standpoint, we can well realize the biological function or importance of this guardian-consciousness. The external world bombards the living organism innumerable stimuli. From all sides thousands of impressions come crowding upon the senses of the individual. Each impression with appropriate receptors has its corresponding system of reactions which if not modified or counteracted, may end in some harmful or fatal result. It is not of advantage to the organism of a highly complex organization to respond with reactions to all impressions coming from the external environment. Hence, that organism will succeed best in the struggle for existence that possesses some selective, critical inhibitory "choice and will" centres. The more organized and the more sensitive and delicate those centres are, the better will the organism succeed in its life existence. The guardian consciousness wards off, as far as it is possible, the harmful blows given by the stimuli of the external environment. In man, this same guardian consciousness keeps on constructing, by a series of elimination and selection, a new environment, individual and social, which leads to an ever higher and more perfect development and realization of the inner powers of individuality and personality.