Who has the Last Word: Sociologists, Biologists, or Philosophers?

Abstract:

The question whether the social sciences need a conception of human nature, and where the truth about human nature is to be found if they do, has often surfaced during the past two centuries; Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* is, if not the originating document for this discussion, at least a fruitful starting point for anxious reflection. The anxiety is familiar: seeking a basis for both moral appraisal and institutional speculation and prediction, we often ask whether institutions ‘suit’ human nature, whether they make demands that cannot indefinitely be met, and so on. If human nature is as malleable as some social theorists and philosophers have thought, any society that can socialize its members into an acceptance of the local norms can be said to ‘suit’ local human nature, and hostile evaluation of such a society could only appeal to an external moral standard with no local purchase. After some reflections on the difficulties into which ‘over-socialized’ conceptions of human nature have run in the past, the paper ends by wondering whether evolutionary psychology promises insights into human nature that we have not previously encountered – or whether its current popularity reflects only a taste for ‘just-so stories.’