CHAPTER 1

The Animal Standpoint

If we look at history from the animal standpoint, that is, from the crucial role that animals have played in human evolution and the consequences of human domination of nonhuman animals, we can glean new and invaluable insights into psychological, social, historical, and ecological phenomena, problems, and crises. The animal standpoint is used here to shed new light on the origins, dynamics, and development of dominator cultures, as well as to redefine the dysfunctional power systems that structure our relationships to one another, to other species, and to the natural world, in hierarchical rather than complementary terms.

Animal standpoint theory, as I use it, looks at the fundamental role animals play in sustaining the natural world and shaping the human world in co-evolutionary relations. While animals have constituted human existence in beneficial ways, they have seldom been willing partners. The main thesis of animal standpoint theory is that animals have been key determining forces of human psychology, social life, and history overall, and that the domination of human over nonhuman animals underpins the domination of humans over one another and over the natural world.

Thus, this approach stresses the systemic consequences of human exploitation of nonhuman animals, the interrelatedness of our fates, and the profound need for revolutionary changes in the way human
beings both define themselves and relate to other species and to the earth as a whole. This chapter explores the animal standpoint in three different dimensions: (1) for the light it sheds on historical dynamics, the origin and development of dominator cultures, and current social, and ecological crises; (2) for its power to undermine speciesism,\(^1\) and advance egalitarian arguments and liberation ethics, while debunking persistent myths regarding a benign human nature; and (3) for its ability to expose the faulty logic of dogmatic pacifism and to validate militant tactics in defense of animals and the earth.

**Toward a New Perspective**

Animal standpoint theory draws from a number of key influences and transcends them in bold new directions. First, it absorbs the perspectivalist philosophy of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.\(^2\) Perception and cognition are always perspectival, Nietzsche argued, and he scorned those who believed that the scientist has privileged access to reality expressed in “objective” knowledge and truths. For Nietzsche there are no explanations, only interpretations, and science itself is interpretation. Individuals always come to any type of knowing or inquiry already burdened by a host of presuppositions, biases, and limitations. A perspective is thus an optic, a way of seeing, and the more perspectives one has at one’s disposal, the better one can see. In order to avoid limited and partial vision, Nietzsche says, one should employ a *variety* of perspectives in the service of knowledge. We typically endeavor to acquire a *single* viewpoint or attitude toward all the occurrences and events of life, but reality is too complex and many-sided to grasp from one outlook.\(^3\) The animal standpoint underscores the fact that history is always written from a particular view, not just from an elitist, patriarchal, or racist bias, but also from a *speciesist* bias—the assumption that humans are superior to animals and utterly unique by virtue of their alleged rationality, such that all nonhuman animals are mere means to their ends.

Second, the animal standpoint is an extension of feminist standpoint theory, which was developed to illuminate patriarchal domination and