Not long ago and for many years prior, beneath the lights of Manhattan’s Chinatown Arcade, a wily chicken strutted inside a greasy glass cage, a seasoned champion at the ancient game of tic-tac-toe. I never met this crafty bird. I never went head to beak, mano a pollo, but if I had challenged the Chinatown Chicken and lost (as downcast hundreds have), would I still be able to eat chicken? Not according to my own tenuous rules of consumption, which require an animal to be stupid before I will accept it as food.

This began two years ago while visiting friends in North Carolina, where I met a very smart, lovable swine named Maybelle. She was one of those Vietnamese potbelly pigs that became popular for about ten minutes in the early nineties. Maybelle was gray skinned with just a bit of fuzz and about the size of a large beagle. The day I met her, she was pulling a piece of mattress into her outdoor pighouse (you know, like a doghouse, only for pork). She was apparently trying to remedy her lack of creature comforts. I
watched her twist and contort this hunk of bedding until it fit through the opening of her abode, after which she huffed and grunted and then immediately took a nap. Later on, she retrieved the newspaper for her owner (a nice southern girl) and curled up at her feet, as loyal and obedient as any pooch I’d ever encountered.

The next week I sat mesmerized with a copy of Charlotte’s Web. I watched the movie Babe with tears in my eyes. How could I eat an animal so obviously intelligent? I mean, did you see that film? That pig was some communicator. And brave, too.

The problem is that basing your diet on intelligence leads into some sticky ethical terrain. As my friend (who I will refer to as Hungry Joe) likes to ask, “Would you eat a retarded pig?” Or even worse, “What stops you from eating really stupid people?” I reply that I’ve yet to encounter a single person less intelligent than even the smartest chicken, to which he simply rolls his eyes. “I guess we don’t hang out in the same circles,” he says, as he slides another strip of bacon between his lips.

Now, I’ve worked with chickens. Right after college, I took a job as the assistant caretaker of a wealthy couple’s sprawling fifteen-acre estate. I was a typical lackey, performing tasks that even the most eatable among us could have mastered. I pulled their weeds. I painted their fence. I roamed in search of excrement, picking up after their many diamond-collared hounds. And I took care of the chicken coop, where a dozen of the beaked simpletons bobbed and strutted and pecked their feed. Each morning I pilfered their warm eggs (to be scrambled and poached at the convenience of my millionaire employers), and each evening I ushered them from the yard to the henhouse. But once, when one of the chickens became sick, it was necessary for me to, um…staunch the spread of disease. I found it incredibly difficult to kill an animal, but I took solace in knowing that I was saving the other poultry from slow death. And also in the fact that the chicken was, in my estimation, a mindless feather pillow, immune from human dread and suffering.

But now, imagine a scenario in which I had to play the feverish chicken at tic-tac-toe, loser to be summarily executed. Talk about pressure! But apparently, any chicken can be made to master this childhood game. The Chinatown
Chicken wasn’t a lone prodigy, a skilled gamesman (or simply skilled game?) beak and feathers above its brethren. There’s a guy out in Arkansas by the name of Bunky Boger (yeah, seriously, Bunky Boger) who applies methods of reward and punishment to raise an army of unbeatable chick-tac-toers. His chickens aren’t yellow; they step to all takers in gambling venues nationwide, from the sandy shores of Atlantic City to the hot neon of Las Vegas. In fact, so confident are the proprietors of the Las Vegas Tropicana in their feathery representative, they regularly offer a ten-thousand-dollar payoff to anyone who can beat the little bugger.

If Bunky Boger can raise a cadre of chicken champions through simple Skinner techniques of positive reinforcement, what else might chickens be trained for? Chess? Jobs in retail? The operation of heavy machinery (via little beak-sized levers and buttons)? In an article in the Las Vegas Review-Journal, Bunky Boger said that while his chickens were “smart little peckers,” he “wouldn’t trust their advice on the stock market.” Well yeah—but I wouldn’t trust anyone’s advice on the stock market. This only renders the fowl more human to me, secret sharers of our powerlessness and uncertainty. Who among us, after all, is not a little bit wary when it comes to putting hard-earned chicken feed on the line?

Hungry Joe is of the belief that we humans are the only species to cross the great divide between animal instinct and self-conscious rationality. For him, and for many others (including Evangelical Christians, who actually believe it is our duty to eat the lesser of God’s creatures, according to scripture1), this is a black-and-white distinction. Joe is not religious. He doesn’t think we have souls. But he thinks we have something and that whatever it is, all the other beasts of earth, sea, and sky have been deprived. And good thing. Joe likes his sausages. He likes his steak. He’s a connoisseur of earth, sea, and sky have been deprived. And good thing.

But Joe’s way out of this meat-eating bind is a little… simple. I can’t accept that all animals are created equal. I’m more than happy to swat flies and trample cockroaches, but I’m less comfortable with the idea of filleting a dolphin or marinating some gorilla steaks. Did you know that chimpanzees can learn sign language? And that they even know how to put the prepositions in the right place? As someone who’s taught writing in various venues for the last decade, I would love to have a couple of these chimps round out my classroom. But my friend Joe says he’d have no problem eating these close evolutionary relatives (after, I suppose, they begged the butcher for their lives with grammatical precision). This is outrageous to me. Chimps behave and interact in ways strikingly similar to my friends and relatives. They approximate human behavior. Doesn’t that mean they also approximate human suffering? Isn’t killing a chimp something much closer to murder than it is to food preparation? And where, by the way, do the primates stand on tic-tac-toe, backgammon, and other games of skill and chance?

Maybelle, the brilliant and adorable pig that started me down this road, simply seemed too smart to harm and certainly too smart to eat. Damn her delicious hide!

Of course, it is true that Homo sapiens are the only creatures on the planet capable of—or burdened by—these ethical considerations. My cat, were she three hundred pounds heavier, would no doubt slaughter and devour me at her earliest opportunity. (I like to think she’d eat me with love in her eyes, but who can really say? Certainly, she wouldn’t stop to check my SAT scores, which are pretty meager, if I’m being completely honest here.) We eat meat not because we have to but because we choose to. And of course, we can choose not to, which is what all the animal rights activists are pleading of us. I see their point of view. Discriminating between the smart animals and the dumb ones is a dicey endeavor, defined by difficult choices and internal contradictions. I’m trying to draw an intelligence line in the sawdust of the butcher’s lot. Beyond this marker, none shall be consumed. But when chickens start kicking your ass at tic-tac-toe, you have to wonder about this system and whether it isn’t just another clever rationalization, like Hungry Joe’s mystery ectoplasm, or whatever it is that he thinks singles us out.

The meat industry is, like most end products of capitalism, deeply and irretrievably corrupt. It’s no secret that animals in our factory farms are tortured from birth to slaughter. It’s also no secret that a pig is a pretty sensitive and intelligent beast. Nevertheless, in the business of meat, the pig is basically a sack of protein that has the unfortunate quality of being born small and in need of maintenance into adulthood. Pigs are cramped onto metal slats in hot steel buildings and fed poisonous, growth-inducing feed spiked with antibiotics to help them survive those very poisons, unable to walk even a few steps and forever hidden from the sun. Chickens fare no better: stacked and crammed in cages ripe with their own feces, beaks clipped, boiled alive (a method of feather removal). And cows? Believe me, you don’t want to know. Cows raised for slaughter endure
conditions that make our worst nightmares seem like a real yawn. There’s a reason slaughterhouses don’t have windows. They hide us from ourselves.

If you don’t want to be complicit in what many would call an evil industry, you’re reduced to eating only animals raised on family farms and treated with a degree of kindness absent from American slaughterhouse culture. So if you’re like me, you’re now limited to eating only the stupid animals and among those only the small subset that have not been tortured or amputated or flayed and burned alive en route to your dinner plate.

Vegetarianism begins to look like a much more sensible option. I mean, it gets so damned complicated. But I’m not a vegetarian. The part of me that wants to eat meat is not easily swayed. Just keeping away from the pork has, at times, been unspeakably difficult. And the only reason I haven’t played a game of chick-tac-toe is that I’m intensely worried about losing. I like my odds at checkers, though. Hear that Bunky Boger? I call red!

Which brings me to a little story that seems apropos of all this hemming and hawing: While working on this essay, I met Joe at a nearby seafood restaurant. We ordered the fried calamari to start. “Did you know,” he asked, as the steaming plate of deep-fried goodness arrived, “that squid are notoriously smart? They use this color-flashing scheme as a method of communication. It’s possible that it’s the earth’s most powerful form of nonhuman intelligence.” Did I know? Of course I knew! As a marine hobbyist, I’ve been a champion of the squid for many years, as Hungry Joe is well aware. But still, did he have to talk about it so loudly? I mean, the squid were laid out on my plate, delicious and intelligent and about to be consumed. It’s wrong, I thought, staring down at crispy rings and tentacles. It’s a crime to eat these squid. It’s greedy and weak and altogether unconscionable. A waiter passed by, and I found myself motioning to him. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Really, I hate to be difficult. But could you possibly bring me some hot sauce?”

NOTE
1. “Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you...,” Genesis 9:3.