

Guest Author: I, Reptile

by Pete Waters

[AskRomeo.com](http://AskRomeo.com)

In my [last article](#) for UML, I talked about Rules of Attraction, specifically what personality characteristics women find attractive in men. This time out, let's delve into some of the psychology and (no kidding) neuroscience that help to explain why we behave the way we do.

### The Man with Three Brains

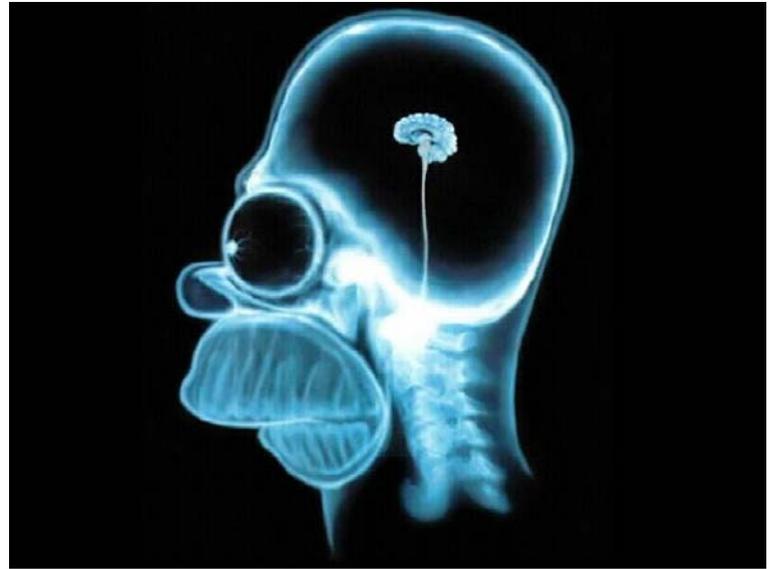
No, we're not talking about a sequel to a classic Steve Martin movie. *Triune Brain Theory* is a legitimate scientific theory that was proposed by neuroscientist and physician Paul McLean in the 1940s and 1950s when he held a joint appointment in physiology and psychiatry at Yale Medical School. (Translation: he was one smart dude.) McLean was interested in the *physiological origins of emotion*, i.e. exactly which specific parts of the brain cause us to be the wacky but lovable human beings that we are.

McLean's theory was based entirely on evolution; specifically, it assumed that a subset of reptiles eventually evolved into mammals, and that a subset of mammals eventually evolved into humans. In simple terms, McLean

envisioned that the modern human brain was constructed of three interconnected layers that mirrored this evolutionary development. Being a scientist, McLean called these layers, or "three brains", the *R-complex*, the *limbic system*, and the *neocortex*. Less-smart guys (that is, us) can think of these "brains" as the reptile brain, the monkey brain, and the human brain. Or, if that's too complicated and you want to be able to understand this after a couple of drinks, let's call these brains the reptile brain, the puppy-dog brain, and the logic brain.

[Here we must make a disclaimer. Although triune brain theory is still popular with some psychologists, in that it can be used (at least as a guide) to explain some aspects of human behavior, it is no longer accepted by physiologists – i.e., McLean's concept of "the reptile brain is connected to the mammal brain is connected to the human brain" (to put it in non-smart-guy-speak) is not exactly physically accurate, from the point of view of neuroanatomy.

In this way, triune brain theory is kind of like celestial navigation. For hundreds of years (until about the 1950s), the best way to know where you were in the world was to use a sextant and a chronometer to measure star positions and thereby determine latitude and longitude. In order to keep the resulting math simple, celestial navigation pretends that the Earth is at the center of universe, which it obviously isn't. (Google "Copernicus" if you don't want to take my word for it.) However, this inconvenient fact didn't stop the Royal Navy



"Mr. Waters, I think we've figured out your problem."

from using celestial navigation to kick the Spanish Armada's butt, colonize America, and then sail on to the South Pacific so Mr. Christian could lead the Mutiny on the Bounty and return to his hot girlfriend on Tahiti. In other words, even though the *physical model* on which celestial navigation is based is completely incorrect, it still gives the right answer. In the same way, we can use triune brain theory, despite its *physical* inaccuracies, to give us good *behavioral* tips that help both men and women play the Great Game.

So, please don't use this article as part of a self-taught course in brain surgery, unless you plan to practice on yourself.]

### **The R-Complex: Breath in, Breath Out. Repeat.**

The "lowest" and most basic of the "three brains" is the R-complex, which we can think of simply as the Reptile Brain. Anatomically, it's the brain stem and cerebellum, and it controls basic functions of life, like breathing and heartbeat. There's not a whole lot of deep thinking going on in the reptile brain – as is apparent to anybody who's tried to have a conversation with Godzilla.



"Godzilla hate calculus!"

### **The Limbic System, a.k.a. The Puppy-Dog Brain**



"I'm a Mawg: half man, half dog. I'm my own best friend."

McLean described the limbic system as "the old mammalian brain", and for our purposes it can be considered to be the seat of the emotions. Obviously, it is this "brain" that regulates (whether we want it to or not) a lot of our dating behaviors, because this is where our attractions and desires "live". McLean believed that the limbic system was the home, and the source, of our emotions and instincts. In fact, the limbic systems is said to be the home of the "4 F's" of mammal behavior: fight, flight, feeding, and, uh... fornication. When we get our groove on for any of those four activities, those impulses are originating from the limbic system.

## The Neocortex: The Human Slide Rule

The neocortex is the seat of all human higher brain functions. It's where we design moon rockets, compose sonnets, and come up with something to say when it's four in the morning and we come stumbling home to find a sig other who is ready to kill us because we've been out all night with the gang and didn't come home or even call. In short, the neocortex is the "logic brain" that makes human beings the distinct creatures that we are among all the world's critters.



"OK, the splashdown was successful. We are now GO for post-mission kegerator power-up."



"Okay, big boy, I can see how logic might have its uses, but is it really worth only getting it on once every seven years?"

## Where We Get in Trouble

Here's the basic problem, and the basic question: in the world of dating and sex, which brain is running the show? From the above, you might guess that it's the limbic system (the emotional or puppy-dog Brain), and you'd be right. Like the puppy's tail, the limbic system responds to emotion – indeed, it can be considered to be the source of emotion – and, while the "three brains" actually are quite interconnected, the puppy-dog brain doesn't care about logic. As we teach at [AskRomeo](#), attraction and desire are purely emotional

things – logic and reason don't have anything to do with them.

How often have you, or a (cough cough) close personal friend, realized that you've got a major thing for someone that logic dictates is really no good for you? Maybe it's the super-hot babe who is methodically turning your bank balance into a jewelry collection while she also dates the football team. Maybe it's that guy who makes you feel like the happiest girl on Earth, but he just won't commit and keeps breaking your heart and why oh why is he so

emotionally unavailable? All of your friends are telling you that “He / she is no good for you, get out now!” And you just keep asking, “*Why do I keep doing this myself? This makes no logical sense!*”

Well, here’s the deal. *There is absolutely no reason to expect that it should make logical sense.* The part of the triune brain where “things make sense” (or don’t make sense) is the logic (human) brain. The part of the brain where *attraction exists* is the emotional (puppy-dog) brain. Attraction is neither logical, nor illogical – it is *alogical*.

Now listen carefully to this next part, because for our purposes this is the most important part of the theory: while the three “brains” certainly do interact, when it comes to attraction, the puppy-dog brain gets 100% of the vote. This is because the psychological aspect of triune brain theory says when the *three brains fight, the lowest brain is always strongest.*

In other words, the three brains are always playing a game of rock-paper-scissors. The reptile brain is “lower” than both the puppy-dog brain and the human brain, which is why it’s impossible to “emote” or “logic” the reptile brain into shutting down the heart or stopping respiration. Similarly, when the puppy-dog (emotional) brain and the human (logic) brain is in conflict over something that the puppy-dog brain wants, even though the logic-brain knows it’s not a good idea, *the emotional brain is stronger.* The logic-brain may *try* to run the show, because society and law and upbringing have said that “it’s supposed to”, but the logic-brain *is highly disadvantaged in this fight.*

Consider: we all know that it’s impossible to “logic someone” into liking us – attraction either occurs in the other, or it doesn’t, based on our behaviors, looks, and other factors. Whether or not someone “should” be attracted to us, in the abstract, simply isn’t an issue – it’s impossible to logically *convince* someone to be attracted to us. In the opposite direction, the logic-brain also cannot “convince” the puppy-dog brain to make us attracted to someone that we’re not attracted to; we’ve all met someone who is a good match for us “on paper”, but who just doesn’t get the juices flowing in reality. Logic and “should be” *just don’t matter.*

This works in reverse, too... our logic-brains can’t override the puppy-dog brain and tell us to not be attracted to someone we like – and this, of course, is an infinite source of trouble. This fundamental fact explains why, for example, a guy or gal will repeatedly end up in a chain of relationships that aren’t good for him or her, either with the same person (multiple train wrecks with the same engineer) or with different but similar people (multiple train wrecks with different but oh-so-similar engineers). The puppy-dog brain *wants what it wants*, and the logic brain can’t convince it otherwise. This is the source of the timeless lament, “I know I shouldn’t, but I just can’t help myself.” (Pascal knew what he was saying when he said that “The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of” – even if he did end that sentence with a preposition.)

[The above two paragraphs can be neatly summed up in the famous words of dating guru David D’Angelo: (1) Attraction is not a choice. (2) *Lack of attraction* is not a choice. (3) Both attraction and lack-of-attraction work in both directions, male-to-female and female-to-male.]

This can be an especially difficult idea for very logical and analytical people to accept. Scientist types, for example, are raised,



“Time-traveling is just too dangerous. Better that I devote myself to study the other great mystery of the universe: women!”

during their years of education and subsequent careers as logical problem solvers, to think that reason can solve anything. Solve that fifth-order non-linear partial differential equation? Piece of cake. Create NASA from a standing start in 1958 and be on the Moon by 1969? Easy. Figure out why Delores from the steno pool – you know, the short blonde who wears the super-tight sweaters – won't go out with me? Why won't she? Why? There must be a logical answer!

Uh, actually... no, Professor, there isn't. Logic ain't got nothin' to do with attraction and sex. Any attempt to try to make it make sense will only (a) waste time, (b) waste money, and (c) drive you crazy. Despite triune brain theory being incorrect from a neuroanatomy perspective – in that there actually are vast interconnections between the neo-cortex (logic-brain) and limbic system (puppy-dog brain) – the psychological, “layering” aspect of the theory can help us understand why attraction doesn't make sense, why it doesn't have to, and why therefore *there is no value in insisting that it do so*. In short – don't try to understand attraction, just enjoy it.

Recall, though, that we said earlier that “the lowest brain is always strongest”. We did not say “the lowest brain always wins”. Remember, neurologically, the brains are connected – they do influence each other. This is a good thing – there actually is hope for us. Given a strong enough motivation – like, say, getting repeatedly dumped by the same guy, being served with multiple restraining orders, or experiencing the complete draining of one's bank account to finance her “acting” career – it is possible for the logic-brain to finally get fed up and get the upper hand over the puppy-dog brain. If this were not true, and we were uncontrollably and inexorably held in thrall by our emotional desires, then we'd be trapped forever. But we are still human beings, we still have logic-brains, and we still control our own destinies. We are not puppy dogs. By understanding the concepts of triune brain theory, we can understand what is going on, psychologically, in our brains and in our hearts, and, armed with knowledge, we can better balance our emotion with reason, and our reason with emotion, and live better lives as we play the Great Game.

### **One Final Point**

I have personally noticed one aspect about the way my own brain (or at least my own consciousness) works that I attribute to the triune brain idea. I don't know if this occurs for other people, but I present it for discussion.

When we get drunk, or subject the brain to other intoxicants, we anesthetize the higher brain functions. We all know that judgment and the ability to reason logically are among the first brain functions to go south when we get hammered. When this happens, our logic-brains, which are normally *trying* to run the show, get shut down chemically, and now the emotional-brain, which is often held in check (albeit poorly) by the logic-brain, gets to run the show without that friggin' logic-brain spoiling all the fun with insecurities and wussy concerns about social norms and rules. I.e., when we get drunk, we get not only stupid, we get *emotional*. This is, of course, the source of the vast majority of “I love you man” comments throughout history, as well as many of the “in retrospect, that was really a bad idea” hookups.

I also believe that the same effect occurs, at least to me, when I'm falling asleep or just as I'm waking up. I believe that during these periods, my own logic-brain falls asleep first, and fully awakens last. Thus, for a few minutes before I drift off and for a few minutes after I first wake up, my emotional-brain gets to operate unfettered from the effects of my logic brain, and what I am feeling is given free rein to express itself in my thoughts without my logic-brain mucking things up with all sorts of reasons why I really *shouldn't* be thinking that. In other words, I can really trust what I'm thinking about right as I'm falling asleep or right

after I wake up. In particular, if I wake up thinking about a woman, I know she's really gotten to me.

Your mileage may vary, but I'd be interested in other people's opinions of this fall-asleep / wake-up phenomenon.

Until then... listen to your puppy dog. It knows what you want.

[For more info on triune brain theory, click [here](#) and [here](#).]