Caught in a Lie

Do you think it’s possible to tell when someone is lying? In story books, an omniscient narrator can tell us whether a character is lying because the narrator knows everything the character is thinking. In real life, though, it’s much harder to judge whether someone is telling the truth.

That’s why police departments today sometimes use a polygraph, popularly known as a lie detector, to investigate crimes. A polygraph is a machine that measures minute changes in blood pressure, breathing, and other bodily functions. Polygraphs are used to monitor suspects and witnesses as they are being questioned.

How does a polygraph work? The suspect is connected to a polygraph by wires. The police officer asks some questions, called control questions, that are not relevant to the case. For example, the officer might ask whether the suspect likes ice cream or whether he has ever visited a particular island near the equator. As the suspect responds to the questions, the machine measures his body’s reactions, recording even minor changes. The officer also asks questions that are relevant to the case. If the suspect equivocates, misleads, or lies to the officer, it is likely that his body’s reactions will change. For example, his blood pressure might shoot up rapidly or his hands might become noticeably damp with sweat. Examining the magnitude of changes over the course of questioning can help the officer judge whether the suspect might be lying about important information.

It still hasn’t been proven that polygraphs are completely reliable. Sometimes, however, the mere idea of taking a lie detector test will cause a suspect to confess his crime. This fact alone may justify its continued use by police departments because it diminishes the need for long, drawn-out trials.