

Is the Lie Detector a Lie?

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How may amperes chase an Ananias; a current catch a crooked conscience; or a light-beam land a liar? Can reflexes reveal reliability; or pulse-rate pick a prevaricating person?

LAST spring after classes were over a local reporter dropped into our laboratory in search of news. His disconsolate look and restless eye betrayed the scarcity of that commodity up until that moment.

"What's that thing over there," he asked sullenly, pointing to a box-like piece of apparatus somewhat smaller than an orange crate—as though "that thing" were responsible for all his misfortunes.

"That's a psychogalvanometer," I replied casually.

He winced at this and muttered a feeble "So long; not much news here."

"Wait a moment," I interrupted. "Do you know the popular name for this? It's a type of lie detector."

Instantly that look came over his face which is reserved only for reporters scenting a story. During the next few minutes we tried out our ability to detect lies in each other. We were highly pleased with our success and the reporter wrote a good story that day.

There probably is no such thing as a lie detector, except in name. And yet this account is designed to explain in part the operation of certain types of apparatus described by that phrase. But before resolving this paradox let us digress a moment.

An ancient writer declared in his haste that all men were liars. He would have been correct if he had added "some of the time." The arts of deception are among the most practiced of human accomplishments. It is no wonder then that crude tests have existed for

ages to discern truth from falsehood in the reports of others. Here is a cynic who reminds us that a man's wife is a perfect lie detector. Solomon discovered the liar of two women by a test that brought forth two types of behaviour. Some travellers support a well-known test for falsehood as practised in oriental countries. The test consists of all the suspects touching a white-hot iron with their tongues. The worst burned is the liar. The explanation offered by these writers is that the liar fears the consequences of a test that he fervently believes in and accordingly his tongue "dries up"; hence the bad burn.

Another example is that of the Arab Sheik who endeavoured to discover which of his men had stolen money from his English guest. He ordered each man individually to enter a tent where his donkey was tied and pull the tail of the animal. The magic beast had the power to discern the liar and would bray when such a one pulled his tail. One by one the men filed in while the Englishman looked on with patient scepticism. Finally, all the men had been "tested" and still no bray. Then the Sheik walked past all his men, sniffing their palms as he went. At last he singled out one man and, accusing him, obtained a confession. Prior to the test the Sheik had put kerosene on the tail of the donkey; and the liar alone was afraid to touch the tail lest the animal would bray. This story reveals two important facts about all tests for guilt deception. First, the attitude of the suspect; had the Bedouin disbelieved the test he would not have hesitated to pull the tail of the donkey. Secondly, the liar revealed himself by a type of behavior different from that of

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