TO HINT is to guide one's audience to some thought while avoiding open endorsement of it, refraining from conveying a message clearly in favour of a performance of obfuscation. For example, if I wish to be alone and am trying to get a friend to depart, without causing him offence, and without feeling able to give a satisfactory account of my wish, then perhaps I shall remark upon the lateness of the hour. Here I am 'merely' asserting a certain proposition about chronology, which is scarcely an indicator of equivocation on my part; but since both of us understand what roles such utterances often play in social meetings, by implication I am able to dangle the signification I intend: that it would be appropriate for him to leave now. So he has reason to suspect that I should like to draw matters to a close—but if he wants to challenge that, what have I offered him to take issue with? I have passed a simple remark about the passage of time, nothing more.

It is this evasion of responsibility for the substance of what one seeks to convey that distinguishes hinting[1] from other forms of indirect communication, such as the ironic remark and the significant gesture. Hinting, I shall contend, is philosophically interesting in the following respects: firstly, it is irrational, and secondly, it is morally dubious. And nevertheless it is a commonplace social practice.

The hint defined

Hinting[2] shares family resemblances with a variety of practices in which we deviate from the sort of paradigmatic declarative statement in which, if I wish to convey the proposition p, I assert that p. The trickiness of pinpointing exactly where hinting blurs into brazen provocation is illustrated by a real-world example from something called DivaVillage.com, in an article advising women through '[t]ips for how a girl can hint to her man what she wants for Valentine's Day'[3]: suggestions range from the merely unsubtle ('Circle items in mail-order catalogues and magazines and leave them in conspicuous places'; 'After he showers and the bathroom mirror is steamed up, finger-write things on the mirror that you want') to the outright non-hint ('Tell a girlfriend (or a female work-associate) to tell your man what you want'). Here I sketch some general distinctions in order to delineate the nature of hinting more sharply.

Like an 'in joke' or allusion, a hint holds some import which can be less than apparent on the basis of the actual words used: one says p to mean q. The difference is that one's audience is not expected to be 'in on' a hint. If, for example, you run into some computer problem and ask people nearby whether they can help decode its cryptic error messages, only to be told 'these aren't the droids you're looking for' (*meaning*: 'no, we haven't the required technical knowledge either'), then depending on your tastes in cinema either you recognise this or you don't. If you do, you know you're dealing with something that's been extracted from its original context, and that therefore you'll have to deduce its import in the present one; if you don't, you're probably just confused.

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[1] I ignore the broader sense of the word 'hint' in which it refers to an overt clue: the sense of 'I'll give you a hint...'

[2] Mostly I shall be discussing hinting as a verbal practice, but I do not mean to exclude the possibility of, say, such a thing as gestural hinting (e.g. making sure one is noticed glancing at one's watch).

[3] http://www.divavillage.com/article_archive.php?id=28425 (retrieved 26th September 2008).

In contrast, a hint is something of an Easter egg hunt that doesn't even come with an 'Easter egg hunt' label. You don't get to be 'in on' a hint by virtue of prior knowledge that marks certain phrases as hints (although experience will have given you general understanding of the sort of techniques people use to drop hints), since sometimes 'it's getting late' implies nothing more than that it's getting late: that's what makes it a suitable phrase for hinting.

The possibility of 'getting' or not getting a hint resembles that of spotting or missing irony: ironic remarks don't inherently look like anything, and so determining when an utterance is meant ironically rather than literally in a given context involves some sort of interpretative skill. The distinction here is that hinting by nature involves subterfuge; that's part of what makes it hinting, as opposed to just not being able to form utterances that mean what you think they do. Irony amounts to feigning rather than genuinely pretending. Quite obvious incongruities can be ironic, albeit bluntly so: for example, if I react to someone's quibbling conspiracy theories by explaining at length how the same thought keeps me awake night after night, slowly eating away at my fragile sanity, etc., etc., this is an admittedly crude example of a remark which surely could only be meant ironically.

Perhaps, then, hinting belongs in that loose category of wilfully ambiguous or obfuscated language with which we can avoid open commitment. A stark example of such communication would be the 'equivocation of the fiend'[4] in *Macbeth*, in which the witches' prophecies are technically true but worded so as to mislead: they tell Macbeth that 'no man of woman born' can harm him, and he later dies at the hands of a man born by Caesarean section. Dissembling with less of a crisp division between suggestive and actual import can be found in certain approaches to political discourse, a nice example of which is again literary. Here a pair of political fixers are deciding on their slogan for an election campaign:

> "And now for our cry," said Mr. Taper. ... "Ancient institutions and modern improvements, I suppose, Mr. Tadpole?"
> "Ameliorations is the better word, ameliorations. Nobody knows exactly what it means."[5]

Hinting is certainly a form of obfuscation, and it does involve plausible deniability. However, it remains an attempt at getting a single 'real' meaning across beneath any smothering of ambiguity: however many forms of subterfuge I employ in dropping hints for the visitor who overstays his welcome, I have one message to get across and I intend it to be understood. I don't, like Shakespeare's witches, let the true import reveal itself only later; if my attempt at hinting is successful, the visitor will be equipped with the tools to grasp the hint *now*, and leave. Accordingly, while I inevitably bring ambiguity into play with the superficial import 'it's late' and the submerged 'please go now', I thoroughly intend that the latter signification shall be recognised as the critical implication; if my visitor is left thinking 'I wonder what he meant by that' without at least having grounds for thinking I *probably* meant 'please go away', then the hint is a failed one.

In what exactly might we be trying to succeed, when we aim to succeed at hinting? In its introduction the essay collection *An Anthropology of Indirect Communication* suggests a variety of motives for rejecting straightforward declarative utterances:

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[4] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5.
[5] Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby* (1844).

to avoid giving offence or, on the contrary, to give offence but with relative impunity; to mitigate embarrassment and save face; to entertain through the manipulation of disguise; for aesthetic pleasure; to maintain harmonious social relations; to establish relative social status; to exclude from a discourse those not familiar with the conventions of its usage and thereby to strengthen the solidarity of those who are.[6]

Some of these are more clearly suitable than others as aims for the particular practice of 'hinting' as just outlined; and it should be noted at once that the diverse forms of 'indirect communication' discussed in the book reflect not only the variety of convoluted ways which people have devised to address each other, but also a variety of uses to which different cultures have put them which it is outside the scope of this paper to examine. For example, we learn that in 'matrilocal Minangkabau society, a mother-in-law shouting at an allegedly lazy cat to indicate disapproval of her daughter's lazy husband might be enough to trigger a divorce'.[7]

Restricting the enquiry to familiar Western settings, we can see that hinting may be deployed in quite diverse circumstances: the initial example I gave was of trying to convey a message to a guest – that he ought to get packing – while feeling unable to convey it to him clearly, but in other cases the person at whom the hinted message is directed and the people from whom it is concealed may not even be one and the same. Suppose you are at a party, and you know another person there well enough to tell, from his behaviour, that he is building up to telling a deeply crude joke which, if not prevented, would in the present company cause profound offence and a diplomatic crisis. Perhaps you would wrest away control of the conversation and try to change its course; and in order to dissuade him from trying to change it back, you might steer it onto a topic like 'tactless people we know and the horrendous social misjudgements they made at parties', as an attempt at flagging up the dangers of an ill-judged joke without giving away any overt sign of impending danger. To be seen clearly warning him about the joke would be dangerous in itself, since people would know that an offensive joke had almost been told; his reputation in particular would be endangered. To construct a hint through a shift in conversational topic, on the other hand, lets you address a warning message to the dangerous individual, who has a chance to interpret it by virtue of knowing what he has been intending to do, while hopefully appearing to everyone else to be simply offering sparkling conversation.

The hint's irrationality

Given the diversity of aims which hinting might be employed to fulfil, then, what might it mean to succeed at hinting itself? Presumably, to succeed one has to get one's intended message across; but if that alone were a sufficient condition, one would be able to succeed at hinting by not hinting, but speaking directly instead. Part of successful hinting must therefore be effective subterfuge in preventing one's meaning from becoming overt; but to 'succeed' at such concealment would be to ensure that the audience did not 'get' the hint, and hence to fail at hinting itself according to the criterion of successful communication outlined a moment ago.

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[6] Joy Hendry and C. W. Watson, introduction to *An Anthropology of Indirect Communication* (ed. Joy Hendry and C. W. Watson; London: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.
[7] *Ibid*, p. 5.

A column in *The Stanford Daily*[8] suggests a co-operative measure of success, reflecting 'the danger that whomever I'm talking to will not "take the hint". Like in [American] football, a well-dropped hint requires a good pass and a good catch. If one happens without the other, then the pass is incomplete.' This reflects familiar practice in treating the ability to 'get a hint' as a social virtue; but that is itself a strange spectacle. One wilfully obfuscates one's intended message in such a way as not only to make it unclear, but to make it non-obvious that such a message is intended at all—and then, faced with the realisation that concealment of the message *has* in fact effectively concealed it, one shifts the blame onto the poor soul onto whom one foisted the task of extracting it without even making it clear that such a task existed: *how could this oaf fail to draw that obvious conclusion from those obvious signs?* But of course the proper and reasonable object of irritation is oneself, an obfuscator of excessive accomplishment and thereby a failed hinter. As the same article continues: 'what if the problem is not that no one else can take a hint, but that I simply can't drop one? ... Inexperienced with subtlety as I am, I often err on the subtle side... by putting forth an overly veiled comment.'

The difficulty is not only that to hint 'successfully' depends on something a hinter cannot explicitly solicit – interpretation by another person – but also that the practice of hinting generally is self-undermining. With each 'successful' hint, in which my surface utterance *p* with its masked intent *q* is interpreted as a hint and so the intended *q* gets through, hinting more closely approximates unmasked declarative utterances. Suppose long experience had given you 100% competence in recognising when my utterance *p* masks the meaning *q*—the upshot would be that in practical terms my asserting *p* for you and meaning *q* had become functionally equivalent to my asserting *q*, and as a would-be hinter I should have to take refuge in some new and more arcane subterfuge *r* in order actually to keep hinting.

You will recall that success in hinting was determined to require success in communicating a message but also success in obscuring it, with a deliberate failure to obscure it thoroughly enough to keep it hidden. However, if that was all there was to hinting it would be possible to hint with consistent success by succeeding in this performance of deliberate failure. (This of course would depend on your interlocutor's consistent success in interpretation, but such dependency is common to communication generally.) Yet the actual upshot of this 'success' would be *failure* at hinting: if your interlocutor persistently interprets your hints correctly, on the basis of past experience of your hinting technique, you're no longer successfully applying obfuscation to begin with.

It is therefore not possible to succeed at hinting just by successfully getting one's obfuscated (but not *too* obfuscated) meanings across, for each successful instance of doing so constitutes a further approach towards the point at which one's hinting can no longer really be considered hinting. Succeeding at hinting requires that some of one's individual hints fail to be accurately interpreted: general success requires occasional failure.

Now I introduce it as a hopefully reasonable premise that a rational agent will not, except in such cases as that of King Knut, aim at what he knows to be impossible[9]: among other constraints, he will not aim at such a contradiction as to accomplish and

[8] Nat Hillard, 'Nat-ural Philosophy: Dropping Hints – a How-To', May 2007, http://daily.stanford.edu/article/2007/5/23/naturalPhilosophyDroppingHintsAHowto (retrieved 23rd September 2008).

[9] *Cf.* K.A. Walton, 'Rational Action' (*Mind*, New Series, Vol. 76, No. 304 (Oct., 1967), pp. 537-547): 'What rational exhortation could be given? When no means can be adopted by the agent to accomplish an aim, the only alternative is to abandon the intention to accomplish the aim.' (p. 537)

not to accomplish something. A rational agent, therefore, will not attempt to hint, since he cannot coherently intend both that each hint should be successful and that some of them should fail.

It is not possible to effect an extended regime of deliberately inserting some communicative 'failures' into one's career of hinting, thereby ensuring that one's hints 'failed' often enough to preserve the ambiguity within which hints can exist; deliberate failure is not an option, since it would turn a 'hint' into mere common-or-garden obfuscation. In any case there is a more straightforward objection: nobody does this.

The hint's moral dubiety

Is the hint then a curious but perhaps also a harmless quirk of human society? The very first example of hinting I presented was one motivated by a wish to avoid hurting the feelings of someone who had worn out his welcome: is that not a harmless, even a laudable goal?

In this final section I criticise hinting as a morally salient phenomenon. The hint, I contend, exhibits an uneasy ambivalence. On the one hand, it does deal softly with my interlocutor's feelings. How much gentler it is to let him (with nudging) come to realise how the night draws unreasonably on, and how kind it would be of *him* not to keep me from my bed, than for me to tell him abruptly that his company has ceased to please me more than the prospect of sleep, or worse still, that he intrudes into a desire for solitude. No wonder the inability to 'take a hint' is considered a social vice.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether I have dealt honourably with my interlocutor in his status as, in Kantian terms, a rational end in himself. To be sure, it is precisely his rational faculties which I have sought to make use of, and my objective is much as it would have been it I had spoken my mind: to place him in possession of certain knowledge, i.e. that it would be fitting for him to leave now. I have not lied[10], except insofar as the lateness of the hour, though it may be *a* reason to wish him gone, is not *my* present reason. By employing a form of subterfuge, however, I disarm his freedom to react – my plausible deniability leaves him without room to make any claim against me, precisely *because he freely drew the inference* towards which I led him – and I make use of his very rationality to avoid responsibility for my intended message. Korsgaard's analysis of Kant's repudiation of lying emphasises that

> deception treats you as a mediate cause in a specific way: it treats your reason as a mediate cause. The false promiser thinks: if I tell her I will pay her back next week, then she will choose to give me the money. Your reason is worked, like a machine: the deceiver tries to determine what levers to pull to get the desired results from you. Physical coercion treats someone's person as a tool; lying treats someone's reason as a tool. This is why Kant finds it so horrifying; it is a direct violation of autonomy.[11]

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[10] But compare the example of averting an awkward situation at a party, where one still does not *lie*, but the aim with respect to most of the guests is nevertheless to *deceive* them about one's purposes.
[11] Christine Korsgaard, 'The Right to Lie: Dealing With Kant On Evil' (*Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 325-349), p. 334.

In hinting, even when it aims at communicating truths, we can find similarities: the treatment of another's reason like a machine being cranked to produce the right results, and the employment of the other as a 'mediate cause'.

> In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant says "whatever militates against frankness lowers the dignity of man"... Kant holds the Socratic view that any sort of persuasion that is aimed at distracting its listener's attention from either the reasons that she ought to use or the reasons the speaker thinks she will use is wrong.[12]

While it's fairly easy to see why it's at least possible that a Kantian treatment of hinting would come down unfavourably, it's also plain that hinting and Utilitarianism are far more natural bedfellows: such an aim as getting rid of guests who have overstayed their welcome in the least offensive manner possible, for example, is very much in accordance with the maximisation of utility. (Of course, hinting can also be used in the service of schemes which reduce utility, so a Utilitarian will not approve of all instances of it.) So I wish to conclude by taking up the challenge of establishing within a broadly Utilitarian framework, if not an argument against the desirability of having the capacity to hint at one's disposal that holds in absolutely all conceivable circumstances[13], at least a *prima facie* case for disfavouring the general practice of hinting on Utilitarian grounds.

It is a possible line of consequentialist objection to hinting that the existence of the practice encourages a generally suspicious attitude towards human communications: when any ostensibly innocuous utterance might conceal a semantic landmine, the result will be a tedious and mistrustful examination of each and every one, sometimes resulting in false suspicions with potential further unfortunate consequences. However, it would be problematic to determine whether this actually does reduce overall utility more than carefully deployed hinting can increase it.

Instead of such a line of argument, then, I want to sketch out an alternative based on the role of risk in consequentialist moral decision procedures. 'Problems of risk have seldom been treated systematically in moral philosophy'[14], but I take it as a reasonable premise that consequentialist ethics cannot very well avoid treating risk as a relevant concern, and as a reasonable inference that risk is, in and of itself, to be avoided, since although there may be cases where Utilitarian calculations make it reasonable or even mandatory to take on some risk where there is a reasonable chance of considerably increasing utility thereby, the element of risk itself introduces uncertainties which make it problematic to aim at any given consequence. Even where all possible consequences would increase utility, uncertainty about one outcome might impede judgment elsewhere: for example, if one choice might result in A and B outcomes, equally utility-increasing in themselves, one's capacity to initiate an even better AC outcome (assuming BC was less advantageous) would be undermined by the possibility of B's occurring instead of A. *Ceteris paribus*, then, the less risk, the better; hence a policy of generally minimising risk is sensible for a consequentialist to follow.

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[12] *Ibid*, p. 336.

[13] Rule Utilitarianism leaves room for general-purpose objections and recommendations, but act Utilitarianism always offers room for thinking up new exception cases.

[14] Sven Ove Hansson, 'Risk', entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/risk/#Eth (retrieved 28th September 2008).

Hinting, as a species of obfuscation, by nature involves creating a risk of not getting the intended message across, thereby increasing uncertainty as to whether that desired goal will be met. Moreover, by thrusting responsibility for interpretation onto another party (without even minimising the risk that the other party will not even realise what his role is supposed to be), it places a substantial responsibility for the outcome on someone poorly equipped to take it. The result is a substantial risk that the consequences will not be, in Utilitarian terms, optimal. While of course there will be potential gains in utility to hope for, such as an avoidance of offence, there will also be a standard risk of failure which is created as a side-effect of the decision to hint itself: someone might be *more* offended by a manipulative hint than by a frank request, or might just get the wrong end of the stick entirely. Since hinting creates risk, there is a *prima facie* Utilitarian case against hinting.

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