Mortimer R. Kadish

THE
OPHELIA
PARADOX

*An Inquiry into the
Conduct of Our Lives*

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Taylor & Francis

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To Emilie

Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.

—Ophelia (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene V)

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The exemplum for the book is John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*. It is apparent. Let it be acknowledged.

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Prologue

The Ophelia Paradox

When Ophelia told King Claudius, “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be,” her state when she said it implied more than that one could never know what would happen next. “Look what happened to me” her words meant to anyone hearing them, “to me, the one whose lover had recently invited her to enter a nunnery, who had lost her father, and so forth. Look at what it did to me. I have gone quite mad!” Bad fortune had not simply happened to her; it had transformed her. The owl was a baker’s daughter, as she had just told Claudius. Even a baker’s daughter never knew what she might be.

Claudius very likely would have commiserated less for Ophelia than for himself. That he, like anyone else, must put up with fortune he would have dismissed as obvious. But he could not so easily dismiss that he himself had not always been a fratricide. The owl was a baker’s daughter, one imagines him coldly considering; he, the king’s brother, had become Cain. To be sure, he had no trouble saying what he was now: the present king. (That Ophelia herself knew what she was he wouldn’t gamble.) But could the king’s brother have known he would become Cain? Could the baker’s daughter who became an owl possibly have known when still a baker’s daughter, though she knew she was a baker’s daughter, what manner of creature she was? If he himself could not have known what he would become, could he know his own self-interest now? Even though we knew enough to make the changes necessary to get from one state to another, that knowledge without the knowledge of what we were and would be afterwards, he might well have brooded, left us the puppets of necessity. The very act of controlling circumstances controlled us. Who knew that better than he? The conduct of his life was a dream. All that remained was to hold fast and to play out his part.

Neither Claudius nor Ophelia herself derived any paradox from her dictum. They merely suffered from it, he cynical and hopeless, she mad;

2 The Ophelia Paradox

he accepting the impossibility of conducting one's own life at the turning points that required it, she illustrating it. For those of us neither mad nor cynical, however, a paradox of sorts arises. Acknowledging that we ourselves change and are changed, most of us nevertheless presume to find some choices in the conduct of our lives better than others, and mean more by that presumption than that we have learned how to find our way around. Experience has convinced us that sometimes the arrow of decision reaches its target, even though, when our normal patterns have collapsed, we may know neither what we are nor what we may be.

To say how the arrow can reach its target we must examine what human beings do in conducting a life and what human beings must be like to conduct their lives as they do, on the occasions they do, and for the kinds of reasons they offer. Then we will see why and in what sense we may hold Ophelia right and, neither dismissing her for her insanity nor buying into Claudius's despair, acknowledge the limits and powers of good reasons in conduct.