For my mother and my grandfather,
who gave me my name
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HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The following aphorisms and essays on the most diverse subjects are not presented as truths but, rather, as snapshots of thinking intended to provoke thinking in turn and, at times, to entertain. They should be enjoyed, examined, tested, and falsified.

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THE FRAGMENTS
Would it were possible to capture the world—life, fate, human folly and human achievement—the small and the big things, sadness, happiness, childhood and old age, music, poetry, love, friendship and hatred, and pain—in one long aphorism!

(Marquis de Rossignol)

All men of whatever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence, or which may properly resemble excellence, ought, if they are persons of truth and honesty, to describe their life with their own hand; but they ought not to attempt so fine an enterprise till they have passed the age of forty.

(Benvenuto Cellini)
ON THINKING AND SADNESS

Some say that thinking makes you sad. What nonsense! If anything, thinking makes you realize that what *makes* you sad is *you*. Thinking is a most effective and lasting remedy for sadness.
ON LYING AND TRUTH

It is commonly held that lying is the opposite of telling the truth. Clearly, however, this cannot be the case, as it is possible not to tell the truth without lying at the same time. This misconception is based on the assumption that both lying and telling the truth belong to the same—declarative—category of speech. Lying and telling the truth are held to be two, diametrically opposed, modes of saying that something is or is not such and such, or that something is or is not the case. While this assumption is certainly correct, it makes us all too easily forget that what makes a statement a lie is not a function of its grammatical structure but of its intentional, volitional, or dispositional thrust. In other words, an untrue statement becomes a lie not because it is not true, but because it was said with the intention or will to deceive. Not telling or speaking the truth is not equal to lying.

What is important about this realization is that it allows us to make a categorical distinction between lying and truth, which may in turn have important consequences for the way we deal with the question of truth and
lying in the various domains of our lives: Lying falls within the purview of ethics, the question of truth falls within the purview of metaphysics or ontology. Lying bespeaks a certain disposition, volition, or stance toward the world and oneself; truth pertains to the way the world and everything in it is or is not.

Thus, we can reasonably teach or expect a person not to lie, but we cannot, at bottom, expect a person to tell or speak the truth, as ‘truth’, being a metaphysical problem, will essentially remain undecided.
ON REINVENTING THE WHEEL

In philosophy the wheel must constantly be reinvented. Knowing what others have thought is not (yet) thinking.
WHY THE ADAGE ‘HISTORY TEACHES NOTHING’ IS AND IS NOT TRUE

If we want to understand the significance of this much-invoked bit of proverbial wisdom we have to ask what ‘teaches nothing’ exactly means in this context. For, surely, it cannot simply mean what it says given that we can obviously learn, for instance, from past mistakes and hence from history, which is consequently capable of teaching us something. In order to make sense of this adage, then, we have to examine its underlying assumptions.

The first assumption is that history is, at bottom, a negative process marked by suffering and violence—hence, the implied injunction to learn from history so as to do it better in the future. The second assumption is that the same bad things continue happening without any real sign of improvement. In light of these assumptions ‘teaches nothing’ would seem to suggest that we are incapable, on the whole, of making the world better.

This holds true only if we think of history as a zero-sum game played out between victims and perpetrators, whereby both sides
learn how ‘better’ to do what they do, with the perpetrators always being one step ahead of the victims, as it were. The perpetrators get better at inflicting harm, the victims get better at withstanding the perpetrators’ onslaughts—but never quite good enough to be able to fend them off completely. The net result remains the same. Thus, only from the impersonal viewpoint of divine objectivity would it be true to say that ‘history teaches nothing’. From the perspective of individual life, this statement can hardly be true, as we all can, and sometimes do learn from the past, which doesn’t mean that we always know how to put what we have learned to good use.