That one of the tasks of philosophy is to describe was one of those points where extremes seemed to meet in philosophy. I seek your indulgence to quote two well-known passages from two philosophers of very different persuasions:

"The primary method of mathematics is deduction; the primary method of philosophy is descriptive generalisation."¹

"Metaphysics is nothing but the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice."²

"We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place."³ "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it."⁴ (Wittgenstein)

A more recent author, P. F. Strawson, called his major work _An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics_, and assigned to it the task of describing the actual structure of our thought about the world.⁵

It would be interesting to examine these and other philosophers who claim to be employing the descriptive method, and to bring out the different kinds of description which we find. A consequence of such an inquiry would be to evaluate the claims of such philosophers to be describing, and to distinguish between genuine philosophical description and such description as only seems to be so. In this paper, I do not
propose to take up this vast problem. Instead of dealing with each such philosopher and his method separately, I propose to consider certain questions of vital importance to any conception of descriptive philosophy—no matter whether such a philosophy remains a mere phenomenology or claims to be a metaphysics. In his 1967 book *Phenomenology and Existence*, Marvin Farber writes that "the question of the range and varieties of description" is "at present still in need of scholarly exploration."

More specifically, the questions with which I shall be concerned here are the following:

1. How is philosophical description different from a description that is not philosophical?
2. How is a genuine philosophical description different from a philosophical statement which only purports to be descriptive but is not really so?
3. How are the descriptive and the speculative components of a philosophical doctrine, or of a system, related to each other?

These questions are intended to lead to a clarification of the meaning and nature of description as a philosophical activity and to an appreciation of its relation to that speculative endeavor which has traditionally been regarded as the very core of philosophizing. I shall also, in the concluding part of this paper, draw attention to the several different types of description undertaken by different philosophers and shall add a few critical comments with a view toward throwing some light on this method of doing philosophy, as I understand it.

Some preliminary observations about the concept of description may be in order at this stage. There does not seem to be complete unanimity about what exactly is mean by 'description,' to say nothing of the question of the possibility of a purely descriptive philosophy. Philosophers have used the concept of description in many different ways, of which the following are the most important:

i. Positivist philosophers of science (notably Mach) have held the view that the task of science is to describe sensory observations, and not to interpret them. Scientific laws, according to Mach, are abridged descriptions and allow us to make predictions. This predictive power is gained by making our primitive descriptions more comprehensive and by restricting the terms of description to the fewest possible common elements. Mach was assuming a sort of one-to-one correlation among the elements of description and elements of the phenomenon being described.

ii. In modern logic and epistemology, Russell has familiarised the contrast between 'names' and 'descriptions.' Descriptive phrases or sentences are about something, and ascribe properties to that which they