Chapter 5
Concluding Remarks

After doing a comparative study of the ontology and epistemology of David Hume and Bertrand Russell, we are of the view that their theories lack practical value. They do not help us in the acquisition of knowledge of the world we live in, nor they address the issues of our everyday life. The goal of philosophical theorizing should be to solve the practical problems of common man.

We started our thesis with the methodological assumption that there is a gap between the claims and intentions of the philosophers we are concerned with. In the chapter on Hume after discussing his epistemological and ontological claims, we have shown that this assumption is justified. The lavish usage of the assumptions of mind and material substances are in stark contradiction to his rejection of them. We conclude that without assuming these two concepts, Hume would not have been able to put across his philosophical ideas. Hume does not give us an explanation about his abrupt assumption of material objects as examples. He never addressed, how are we supposed to know his concept of ‘bundle’ of perceptions. If we follow Hume’s argument, we can also dismiss his concept of ‘bundle’, as we do not have any impression or perception corresponding to this concept. If we take out the assumed self (‘we’ relate, ‘we’ compare, ‘we’ reflect) from Hume’s theories, then their very existence is threatened.

Though Russell intelligently manipulates his way out from each of his assumptions, ultimately he ends up exhibiting his inconsistencies. This is conspicuous from his assumption that ‘objects’ in the sense in which he uses, can exist without any problems and confusions but ‘objects’ in a layman’s sense cannot exist. It is evident that his recurrent shift in positions is a desperate attempt to escape from his previous inconsistencies. Russell’s transition from phenomenalism to neutralism bears evidence to this fact. He imposes inferred entities with an aim to get rid of them ultimately, but they remain intact and force him to adopt another
position. By shifting from causal theory of perception to phenomenalism Russell separates the mental world from the material world. That is, the subject of knowledge, conscious human being is separated from his biological and social basis. Phenomenalistic position of material objects and self lies in his philosophy of logical atomism, which conceives every unit of reality to be discrete and unconnected particulars. His pluralistic view of reality imposes self-subsistence to particulars. Their self-subsistence is of the kind which substance possesses (Cartesian concept) with the exception that these particulars are fleeting. Their existence last as long as we experience them. Hume and Russell have to face such problems due to the inappropriate matching of the mental aspect of Descartes' dualism with their empiricism.

Our attempt in this thesis to trace linguistic philosophy from Classical empiricism, brings to light the point that Russell's ontological position depends upon the pre-suppositions he makes in his epistemology, which is empiricism. We have also shown that Russell follows the Classical British empiricism of Locke, Berkeley and especially, that of Hume. As we have shown, Russell is largely indebted to Hume for his ontology and epistemology. Both consider reality to be innumerable number of discrete, separate atoms. While Hume advocates psychological atomism, Russell believes in logical atomism. We have seen that there is no essential difference between these atoms. It is appropriately said that Hume's is a psychological form of analytic philosophy.

It is our view that Russell's claim that through the method of analysis one can reach the ideal or perfect language, that represents the reality, is a false one. We argue that because man wants to communicate the reality that he developed language and not as Russell thinks, through language reality is achieved.

We have seen that the fundamental mistake of both Hume and Russell is to reject the concepts of mental and material substances and consequently causation also. They fail to realize the fact that unless we accept these basic concepts, we
will not be able to acquire complete knowledge of any kind, including the knowledge of objective reality. The world in which we live is not 'constructed' out of subjective perspectives, as these philosophers thought, nor it exists exclusively in the mental level. There is an objective world which provides a base for all our actions and practical activities, apart from a subjective world where understanding and reflection take place. Both realms are equally important. Neither is superior to the other. The theories of Hume and Russell (and their predecessors) give a far superior place to mental realm. Consequently their theories cannot help us in the acquisition of the knowledge of objective world. Or even if they do, it will be at the most partial; and partial knowledge, by definition, is not complete knowledge.

The tangible defect of Hume and Russell in denying an enduring substance, necessary causal connections and a persisting self cost them heavily. Their theories turn out to be inefficient in solving the riddles of every day life. In this sense their theories lack practical value and consequently cannot be considered as proper systems of philosophy.

Hume and Russell's intention of interpreting human knowledge and external world turned out to be a difficult task because of the ambition to combine their empiricism with ontological aspect of Cartesian dualism. As a result, instead of solving they augmented our problems of knowing. Before constructing elaborate systems of knowledge, they should have asked themselves the question, 'Can construction of knowledge possible without accepting a conscious, thinking human beings?’ Hume and Russell attempted their theories without fulfilling this basic requirement.

By accepting sensations in abstractions as the only source of knowledge and subjective, isolated units as the only objects of knowledge, Hume and Russell carve their ontological positions to be pluralism and epistemological positions as extreme empiricism. By limiting the source of knowledge only to private sensations they lead themselves to solipsism, which can in no way provide knowledge of objective
world. By following the mental aspect of Cartesian dualism, these empiricists defined human being as pure consciousness or 'I' or mind, without his biological (and social) aspect.

Whatever concepts Hume and Russell interpreted, self, human being, material objects all are known to us only through ideas in the layman's sense. Whether it is impressions of Hume or sense data of Russell all have reality only with reference to mind. They do not exist when we are not 'perceiving' them. Therefore, we conclude these empiricists philosophers as idealist philosophers. More precisely Hume to be a subjective idealist, and Russell, an empiricist-idealistic.