THE IDEA OF CONSCIENCE

The remainder of my argument will be based on the assumption that a cognitivist account of morality is correct and hence that there is such a thing as moral knowledge. Granted that there is something called ‘moral knowledge’, the questions arise: How do we acquire it? How is it constituted? If answers to these questions can be developed, then the assumption that there is such knowledge will be supported.

A traditional answer to the question as to how we acquire moral knowledge is ‘Through conscience’. The idea of conscience as the seat of the individual’s knowledge of right and wrong is linked to the phenomena of conscience: conscience invites us to do acts before our plans are set, witnesses our acts as we perform them, and accuses/excuses our conduct after action is complete. The phenomena of conscience testify to the apparent ability of all of us to refer future, present and past conduct to informed judgement of the good and the right. This presumed ability is what enables us to feel comfortable with the universal character of moral judgements and to hold all accountable for the moral worth of their actions. The existence of conscience appears to be the basis of the moral autonomy of each normal individual. Each is capable of being a judge of the correctness of his or her own actions. Each possesses a moral intellect which is free and independent of reliance on any authority. Conscience enables each person to function as a moral agent and to be held responsible for his or her actions in consequence.
Our traditional answer to the question of the source of knowledge of right and wrong is not incorrect, but it is incomplete and liable to be misleading in two respects: first in leading to the personification and isolation of the moral intellect, and second in suggesting that moral knowledge depends in its constitution on general knowledge and a theoretical account of the good and the right.

The personification of conscience arises naturally out of the tendency to seek a thing which the noun 'conscience' names and is encouraged by our talk of conscience 'warning', 'advising', 'admonishing' us and the like. So we may be tempted to think of it as an invisible monitor at our elbow, informing and encouraging us in the practice of virtue (see Kirk 1933:52). As Kenneth Kirk notes this is consistent with the personification we give to other principles of action in our lives. Prudence, honour, caution may likewise be spoken of as telling us this, dictating that we do that (1933:53). Such harmless metaphors may become vicious if they are seriously taken to imply that there is a separate faculty which is the human conscience. In that case, we are led to see conscience as somehow how separate from the self that it is connected to. If it is viewed as an added extra tacked onto the human self, talk of conscience clouds our understanding of the moral intellect. We may be encouraged to view the self as at best essentially amoral, or worst of all, immoral. It takes a distinct entity to see and acknowledge the moral truth – left alone the self has no inclination to see and pursue the good and the right. Personifying language of this sort might suggest that the self is the helpless plaything or battle-ground of forces over which it has no control. So: desire pulls it one way, conscience another. But such a picture leaves totally unclear how an agent’s choice of a course of conduct in the face of competing considerations can be his or hers: something which he or she has decided upon and is accountable for (Nowell Smith 1954:263–4). Above all conscience as a separate faculty invites the thought that moral knowledge is acquired differently and independently of other forms of knowledge. We learn facts and principles of judgement about non-moral matters in the course of ordinary experience and education but a separate faculty (perhaps specially stocked with innate or God-given principles) is required for moral knowledge. It should, I shall insist, be a requirement of any account of moral knowledge that it allows such knowledge to be acquired through the same intellect that acquires other forms of knowledge and to be