

What After All Is Compassion?

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Compassion is born of wisdom and courage and can only be realized through devoted attention to its facets and origins. It is most often misunderstood, misused, or dismissed as something merely soft and sentimental. It is frequently confused with pity, charity, empathy, sympathy, and even sentimentality. The nature and work of compassion is elusive and mysterious. It is not surprising that it is so often surrounded by such confusion. To understand compassion means to study the nature of suffering—the intertwining of moral, psychological, and physical suffering—and the need for compassion which arises out of that suffering.

Compassion, like freedom, is a word whose meaning becomes clearer and finally clarified in practice, when known through desire and need, in hands-on life, so to speak. Also, like freedom, compassion is shown to be a mutual act drawn from interdependence between two or more people who suffer together for its realization. While freedom may seem an individual experience demanding that an individual act his or her way out of passivity, in fact it may also

depend on action and reaction from others to be realized or denied. Compassion is also an action and a reaction, an interchange of desires which form a passion in which one takes on and gives and another gives and takes on. That action diminishes the isolation and passivity that can exaggerate suffering beyond a human being's capacity to endure and even psychologically control its passage through his or her body and psyche.

This interchange is most profoundly and vividly depicted in works of literature and art which mirror human life in its range of experiences, especially its passions and extreme capacities, its release and suffering, its cravings for freedom and needs of compassion. No textbook can express the simple unselfconscious, monosyllabic cry of pain and joy found in life and echoed in literature, which goes deeper than any theory about humanity. Thus, literature is a crucial primary source for those concerned about human care, especially for those needing to deepen their understanding of how humans both need and are aroused to give care. It is a mirror that shows both carer and cared for sharing in the action of compassion, through their common humanity responding in each.



Detail of Rodin's *Burgers of Calais*