So I've been thinking for a while about why we have so much suffering in our world. I can't believe that it's necessary, so I have to consider where it came from. The following Musings will be about what I believe to be the basic cause for why we are so evil to each other.

The first Musing is about capitalism.

I know, I know, the word itself triggers strong reactions in a lot of people. I should start with a blanket disclaimer: I am not an economist. I have zero experience or training in financial matters. All of this is based on my observations of people I know, and the political system in which I live. I am not claiming to be any kind of expert on any of this. Here goes.

From my basic understanding, the whole goal of people living in a capitalist system is to use their money (capital) to get more money. They invest money in some kind of venture, in the hopes that the venture will be able to 'pay off' and get them more money than the original amount spent. These people's objective is to make money, and it's the only objective that matters in the slightest within a capitalist system.

Ok, that sounds pretty straightforward so far.

How did capitalism get started? From what I've read, around the time the French Revolution started, monarchs and lords all over Europe were beginning to realize that monarchies themselves were pretty much doomed. A bunch of philosophers and advisors to those monarchs got together, and decided to come up with a new system. They wanted a way to keep the power with a small group of people, but move away from the dying 'kingdom system' before it took them down with it. The idea of a rule by the people, like the new American system, was only a few years old, and hadn't really taken hold in Europe yet.

People who sold goods for a living had been around for a very long time by now. People were used to seeing merchants in markets, hawking wares, haggling for a better deal, etc. It was very easy for these advisors and philosophers to convince people that a 'free market' system could advance their goals far better than the monarchies they'd just overthrown, or were about to severely weaken.

Think about it: in a monarchy, the only way to advance yourself is through blood. If you aren't born a noble or royal, you will most likely never become one. The best you can do is marry one of them and have kids, who will themselves be noble-ish. You have no chance of making yourself more powerful. Almost everyone recognized that monarchies only benefitted the tiny fraction at the top of the system.

By comparison, the idea of a 'free market' system must have looked a lot more attractive. If anyone who has any money can use that money to get more, then suddenly anyone can do.. anything! No wonder it caught on in America right away. On paper, it looks almost identical to the ideals of a rule by the people. If you're political, you can put your hat in the ring, and try to get people to vote for you. If you're economic, you can put your money in an investment, and try to get that investment to pay off. Neither requires you to have a noble family, or royal blood in your veins.

The trouble is when you subject both capitalism and democracy to the passage of time.

Over time, democracy is self-correcting. The idea that everyone has an equal say wasn't lived up to at all, at the beginning. Women and black people had no say. Black people had no rights at all! Over time, democracy slowly changed that. Women's suffrage became a thing (if way later than it should have been). Slavery was ended (again very later than it should, and done in a very bloody fashion). As time passed, more and more subsections of the society gained power in democracy, making it look more and more like the ideal of 'everyone has an equal say'. We're not there yet, by a long shot, but we're closer than we were.

By comparison, capitalism is self-reinforcing. On paper, anyone who has two cents to rub together can use them to make more money. At first, that's certainly how it worked out. Eli Whitney certainly didn't have much money to start with, but he had an idea for an invention. He patented that invention and sold it, and boom: money. But over time, monopolies became a thing.

If I'm a young economist, and I have a great idea for a new product, or for a clever cost-saving method, I can start my own business. In the early days of capitalism, I might have gone pretty far with it. However as more and more money gathers in the hands of fewer and fewer people, those people don't just pocket that money. They use it not just to expand their business, but to attack competitors. My brilliant new product or idea would get strangled in the crib in modern days. Either they'd try to buy me out (applying all sorts of leverage to make sure I complied), or they'd sabotage me. (Look up corporate espionage- it's a fascinating topic). Or they'd lobby the political leaders until those leaders changed the laws to make my business untenable!

People who promote capitalism claim that it's a system in which anyone can succeed. Regardless of who they are, where they're from, what they believe, etc. On paper that looks true, but in practice it's more of a sick joke!

Say I'm the owner of a relatively successful business. I'm a good person, who likes my employees and wants to give them every opportunity. I want to offer them health benefits, and a good pension. I like gathering them together for regular holidays, where I can offer them bonuses for being such good workers!

Unfortunately, that money doesn't come from nowhere. I might be able to take it out of my own pocket at first, but I can't do that forever. Eventually I'll need to take it from the company's profits. Ok, that sounds fine, right? I mean they work at the company. Shouldn't they profit from it?

Enter the business competitors. Every dollar I take out of my company profits is a dollar I can't spend on investments. A dollar my competitors are spending on their own investments. If I'm kind to my employees, I have less to invest, and fewer rewards to reap! If I'm kind to my employees... eventually I'll go out of business.

And it's not just that being a successful business owner prevents you from being kind. If my 'good capitalist' example can't afford to give his people benefits or a pension, that's bad enough. But what if he's not so successful anymore? What if hard times hit, and his competitors start getting the upper hand? In order to stay in business, doesn't he have to start cutting back on employee overhead? Firing people, or lowering their pay?

Those same people who promote capitalism claim that it lifts people out of poverty. Technically, that's true. It lifts some people. But at the same time, the whole idea of building a business and maintaining it in a competitive market compels people to be cruel! What's that saying? "It's not personal. It's just business?"

Ok so on the one hand we have democracy: the idea that everyone should have an equal say in how they're governed. It's been amended many times, and mostly for the purpose of including more people groups. On the other hand we have capitalism: it started out relatively evenly across the whole population, but over time became a rigid top-down system, where all the money pooled in the hands of just a few people.

Doesn't it sound like these two systems are in conflict? And over time, that conflict will become more and more obvious? Wouldn't corporate-owned media outlets be required to repeatedly broadcast their praise for a capitalist system over the airwaves, just so that the average citizen would remain unaware of that conflict?

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As boring as all that explanation was, I missed one key detail as well! Money is not infinite!

Generally, the amount of money within an economic system is static. It doesn't go up or down. Sure, sometimes a government will print more money, and sometimes individuals will counterfeit money, but the overall amount usually remains the same.

Which means that the capitalist ideal of making money is itself a lie! You don't make money. You don't fabricate it, or manifest it, or summon it through some arcane ritual. You acquire it! You gain it, obtain it, reclaim it. You.. take it.

When I talked about my philosophical and religious beliefs, I stated that from childhood I believed if I had something, then someone else didn't have it. They were suffering because I had more than I needed.

If capitalism requires me to take money from other people, doesn't that make it wrong? At least by my individual philosophical definition anyway?

Ok, ok. Capitalists would say that no one is being compelled here! No one is being forced to give up their money. This isn't a barbaric system, it's an enlightened one, right? We've moved beyond just taking things from people. Capitalism is voluntary. Right?

Is it? If I don't work, I don't get a paycheck. I can't afford food, water, shelter. I die! Sure, I can get a job at another company instead, but it has to be a company. It has to be a business. It has to be capitalist.

In effect, capitalism has pointed a gun to all our heads and said that we're doing what it wants willingly.

I know that sounds hyperbolic. Sensationalist. Way over the top. But really, what alternatives do we have to capitalism, if we literally starve or freeze to death without it?

That's what the next Musing will try to answer.

Until then, just think about the basic contradictions between capitalism and democracy. Think about how much money the Bezos' and Zuckerbergs have compared to the average citizen. Think about how different that is from what early capitalism looked like, and how very similar it looks to the old monarchies it replaced. I'd also say try not to get angry, but I can't really support that one. I'm angry about it, and frankly that anger is useful.