

“ERIC”

How a Bad Think-Thing Destroyed the World

A short story by Vic Grout

On the planet ‘Arth’ (which, if it helps, you can think of as being like Earth but without the ‘E’), things were going pretty smoothly. Arth society was organised roughly into three groups of people: *doers*, *thinkers*, and *leaders*. There was no great difference in status or esteem among the three groups but there were a good many more doers than thinkers and a lot more of both than leaders.

So, yes, most people were doers: they did things. They found raw materials and turned them into what people needed; they made clothes, built shelter, grew food; they moved it all to where it had to go; they repaired and cleaned. They cared and treated mind and body; kept people safe; raised families; looked after the young, the old and the ill; they taught new generations. There were also doers that entertained; made nice things to look at, told stories, played music or sport. All of these doers together made Arth a comfortable and happy place to live.

Not everyone was born to be a doer though: some found doing things difficult. Luckily, most of these were better at thinking so they became the thinkers. They thought about how the planet worked and why things happened the way they did. They thought about people, individually and in groups and how they behaved. They thought about right and wrong and how to make life better. Sometimes their thinking led to new ways for the doers to do things.

The few that weren’t good at either doing or thinking became the leaders. They decided the rules that everyone had to follow. And in fact this worked pretty well because they mostly just did what the thinkers suggested. So they made rules that worked for the doers and, when the thinkers thought of something better, they changed the rules.

Arth society had worked like this through good times and bad. When some crisis had arisen, the various thinkers: people thinkers, science thinkers, etc. had worked out what the problem was and suggested to the leaders what should be done about it. The leaders had changed the rules and the doers had done things a different way. When the crisis had passed they either went back to the old ways of doing things or, if they like the new ways better, they stuck with them.

The doers did. The thinkers thought. The leaders led. And everyone was happy.

Except Eric.

Eric just didn’t fit in. He’d tried *doing* things but couldn’t do any of them. He’d tried *thinking* about things but wasn’t any good at it. He was obviously a born *leader* but he didn’t want to be one. Eric wanted to be a *thinker*.

So the thinkers tried to help Eric. The science thinkers tried to show him how to think about science; the people thinkers about people. But Eric just couldn’t think about those things. Eventually, someone joked that he might have to find something different to think about.

And sadly that’s what Eric decided to do.

Eric decided to invent something new to think about. He had no idea what so he started with the name. Other 'think-things' had names. 'Sociology', 'Biology', 'Psychology', 'Ecology', etc. were all taken so he chose the name 'Ericology' for his new thing to think about.

He was stuck at this point and didn't know what to do next but the other thinkers were still trying to help. They showed him that the things they thought about often started with definitions, names and labels. Eric liked the sound of labels so he decided that was how he'd start his new thinking. The other thinkers tried to explain that there was a lot more to their thinking than labels but Eric had stopped listening.

So Eric began labelling things. He started with his house. He put labels on every object he could find. At first the labels were blank but, when one of his thinker friends suggested this might not give him enough to think about, he started writing numbers on the labels. The numbers didn't mean anything of course: he just made them up as he stuck each new label on something. Soon his house was covered in numbered labels. His friends asked Eric what the numbers meant: he didn't know so he said they were 'Eric Points'.

Once he'd finished his house, he asked his neighbours if he could label things in their houses too. Most said no but a few said yes to be kind. Soon everything in their houses was labelled with Eric Points. Eric even stuck Eric Points on them and their houses too.



Even so, Eric's progress was slow and Ericology probably wouldn't have got much further were it not for two things. Firstly, Eric had some friends among the leaders; secondly, it turned out there were other people like Eric who wanted to be thinkers but couldn't think – and these had friends too. Eric collected the other would-be thinkers together and they spoke to their leader friends about how good Ericology was. The leaders, who were mostly used to *not* understanding things the thinkers thought about, understood Ericology and, because they could understand it, they liked it.

So the leaders, against the advice of the other thinkers, decided to accept Ericology as a think-thing and allow others to become Ericologists. Groups of Ericologists were now given free rein to label everything and everyone with Eric Points whether people liked it or not. Absolutely everything was to be labelled eventually; but that would take too long so after a while the Ericologists stopped actually putting labels on things and just made long lists of everything with their Eric Points written against them. Then they started adding up the Eric Points on their lists and working out what and who had more Eric Points than the rest.

So the Ericologists became the thinkers they wanted to be and the leaders had to listen to them like the other thinkers. In fact they sometimes had to listen more because the Ericologists would threaten to give them fewer Eric Points and they didn't like that. Soon the leaders had to take Eric Points into account when they made decisions even though they *still* didn't have any real meaning.

Eventually everything: work, leisure, people, houses, food, clothes, sport, stories, music, etc. had Eric Points and Ericologists would complain to the leaders if things didn't add up properly. The rest of the thinkers belatedly tried to point out that none of it actually meant anything but the leaders were forced to listen to the Ericologists and made new rules for the doers based on Ericology.

So now the doers were also constrained by Ericology. Because some had been given fewer Eric Points than others, their work and their things sometimes didn't add up to the things they needed for their survival or leisure. This hadn't been a problem before Ericology but they now had to exchange things with different Eric points to make up the difference. However, because those with more Eric Points were generally under less pressure to make these exchanges, they were able to make better deals, and often those with fewer were soon back to having Eric Points that didn't add up for them. Moving around Eric Points to take advantage of people without many became a thing in itself. Eventually Eric Points were even exchanged on their own – without the things they'd been assigned to in the first place – and the Ericologists that did this kept some of the Eric Points for themselves.

Of course, most people weren't happy about all this. The doers were having to compete with each other for no other reason than because their Eric Points didn't add up and most of the thinkers were still arguing that Ericology wasn't a real think-thing: that there was no actual 'truth' in any of it. The original Eric, now Chief Ericologist, realised something had to be done so he asked his best friend Marcus to take a look. Marcus quickly realised that they couldn't stand up to the other thinkers on real meaning or actual truth so they went the other way. A new field of 'Marcusing' was established within Ericology focused, not on truth, but on spreading an 'alternative-truth' about things that didn't matter in a convincing way. Marcusing persuaded the doers that the problem wasn't Ericology but other doers, sometimes the thinkers, occasionally leaders – but definitely *not* Ericologists. But for good measure the slightly scientifically dubious Ericology was rebranded as 'Ericonomics' anyway. And at some point Marcusing became 'Marcuting'.

In a short time, this new Ericonomics, supported by Marcuting, had developed from a silly idea, through phases of being a dubious think-thing, then an accepted think-thing, to being the most important think-thing. Doers and thinkers had to align their doing and thinking with the Ericonomists' addings-up of Eric Points. They couldn't do or think things if they didn't. The leaders now put the Ericonomy and advice from Ericonomists foremost in all their decision making. They used Marcuting to deflect criticism from the (slowly decreasing) numbers of thinkers who still pointed out that it was all nonsense. To reflect the fact that Arth was now an Ericonomic society, an extra 'E' was added to the name and the planet became 'Earth'.

And now some new crises appeared. People's balance with the planet had been breaking down for some time because the Eric Points had added up to ... well, still no-one really knew but certainly not for the general good. (E)arth's raw materials were beginning to run out. But there were more people using them everywhere because more people added up to more Eric Points and the leaders thought that was nice. Groups of doers with fewer Eric Points had banded together for self-protection and there was now increased tension over the dwindling resources, and growing violence. Unknown diseases also began to appear to add to the general difficulties. The future presented a multi-faceted but immediate problem.

The original thinkers though were still thinking and had solutions. And there were plenty of doers who could put the solutions into practice. The science thinkers showed how existing materials could be reused to save raw materials. They found new ways of generating energy and cleared the way for tackling illness and disease. The people thinkers explained how the doers could be reorganised to save resources and focus more on the essential tasks that were going to save people.

But the Ericonomists said it wouldn't work because the Eric Points didn't add up. The science thinkers produced physical laws and formulae and the people thinkers explained people – but the Ericonomists waved their lists of Eric Points. A few of the original thinkers tried one last time to remind the leaders that the Eric Points were arbitrary, that Ericonomics had never been a real think-thing, that there was never any real truth in it; that there was – and always had been – another way of thinking.

But the leaders now listened *only* to the Ericonomists, not the other thinkers. By now, over the years, many Ericonomists had themselves become leaders. A new generation of doers, even many thinkers, had been born that just accepted Ericonomics, not just as a real think-thing but the *only* think-thing. They weren't even angry any more – except with each other of course. The other thinkers were wrong because the Ericonomy was right. The Ericonomy was now the only thing that mattered and the Ericonomists held absolute power. Anyone who questioned Ericonomics was a deluded dreamer. Anyone who kept questioning it was hounded and vilified. There was no other way of thinking. There never had been any other way of thinking. Anyone who thought there was didn't understand: they were naïve; they weren't clever enough to understand. It had to be this way. There was no other way.

So everyone died because there was no other way.

THE END