ARTICLE 2

The Formula of the Real

Grégoire Falque · 6 July 2026

What is a proof?

Not a trace. Not a recording. Not a memory. A proof is what cannot be erased, altered or contested without leaving a mark in the world. A proof resists. It weighs.

In the previous article, I set out the formula of the real:

> Real = Matter × Friction × Effort

Three variables, a multiplication, a result of zero if one is missing. The structure is simple. What it contains is less so: each of the three variables hides a paradox our time does not want to face. This article goes into the formula, one variable at a time.

I. Matter — the paradox of the archive

Let us begin with the most counter-intuitive paradox.

We live in the most archived era in history. Every movement is recorded, every transaction tracked, every exchange kept on a server. One might think matter had never been so abundant.

It is the opposite. We produce traces on a massive scale, and almost no proof.

The difference between a trace and a proof is not a question of quantity. It is a question of irreversibility.

A trace documents that an event took place. But it can be erased, retouched, falsified, without the world remembering. A photo can be altered pixel by pixel. A story disappears after twenty-four hours, by design.

A proof is a trace that can no longer be undone. To contest it, one would have to alter the world itself, and the alteration would show. Lead cannot be un-cast. The cube the Bureau seals cannot be taken back: it is there, it weighs 1.3 kg, it bears a date.

THE PARADOX OF DIGITAL MEMORY

Humanity waited thousands of years for a total memory, and that memory is the most fragile it has ever known.

A letter written by hand in 1850 and forgotten in a drawer proves more than a million messages exchanged on a platform that may close tomorrow, be bought the day after, and delete its archives the day after that.

This is not nostalgia. Paper degrades, but slowly, without intention, and its degradation leaves traces. Digital deletion is instant, clean, without residue.

The matter the formula speaks of is therefore not a question of medium. It is a question of irreversibility. And irreversibility has become the rarest thing of our time.

II. Friction — what is mistaken for suffering

This is where I am most often misunderstood.

When I speak of friction, people hear: Falque thinks suffering is a value. Falque advocates difficulty for its own sake. Falque misses a time when everything was hard.

That is wrong, and wrong in a way that matters.

Friction is not suffering. It is resistance. What defines it is not that it hurts, but that it transforms whoever passes through it. No one comes out of a friction unchanged. That is its only criterion.

A bereavement is a friction, not because it causes suffering, but because it separates a before from an after. A difficult decision is a friction, not because it is painful, but because to choose is to give something up, and giving something up cannot be undone. Learning is a friction: one does not unlearn.

WHAT THE FLOW REALLY REMOVES

The flow does not remove suffering. One can suffer while scrolling a screen for three hours. One can be sad there, anxious, angry.

What the flow removes is transformation.

One can go through intense emotions in front of a screen and come out unchanged. The emotion has circulated. It has moved nothing.

It is the difference between crying at a film and crying on someone's shoulder. Both produce tears. Only one engages a body beside another body, and changes something between them.

Friction is not a punishment. It is the condition of metamorphosis. A real without friction no longer transforms anything.

III. Effort — the body as condition

Effort is the most concrete variable in the formula, and the most radical.

It is too quickly understood as a matter of sport, muscle, sweat. That is too narrow. Effort is what the act really costs a body: time, fatigue, attention, a presence held to the end. Not the intention to do it. The fact of having done it.

Effort is a reminder that the real always passes through a body. This is deliberate. A long tradition held that the idea comes first, that intention is enough, that the body is only a temporary vehicle. The formula says the opposite: without a body, no effort; without effort, no real. The body is not the vehicle of the real. It is its condition.

THE CASE OF THOUGHT

Someone will say: and thought? An inner decision, a deep resolution, does that cost nothing?

It does. Thinking is tiring. But a thought that stays in the head does not produce the real. It produces the possible. The possible does not weigh, does not resist, leaves nothing. For it to become real, it has to pass through a resistance, and something of it has to remain in the world.

WHAT THE BUREAU RECORDS

The Bureau des Protocoles does not put a figure on effort. It does not judge whether it was great enough, or whether it was sincere. It records that it took place: this act, on this day, at this place, executed to the end. Then it seals it.

This is not a measurement. It is a finding. In an era where everything is declared, recording is already a demand.

IV. Multiplication — why not addition

The choice of multiplication is not a detail. It is the heart of the formula.

WHAT ADDITION WOULD ALLOW

If the formula were an addition, it would allow compensation. Very strong friction would make up for zero effort. Abundant matter would replace absent friction.

That is exactly what the flow does: it compensates for the absence of resistance with an abundance of traces. A million photos of an event do not replace the effort that did not take place in the event itself.

WHAT MULTIPLICATION SAYS

Multiplication says that all three variables are necessary, and that none replaces another. If one is missing, everything is missing. Not reduced. Zero.

It also says something else: the variables do not add up, they drive one another. A stronger resistance makes the effort more committed. A more committed effort leaves a deeper trace. An act that has passed through a great deal of friction does not only weigh more: it weighs differently.

Not all acts weigh the same. The formula does not say how much. It says there are degrees of weight.

V. What the formula really is

One last thing before concluding.

The formula is not calculated. It is not an instrument of measurement. It is an instrument of distinction. It does not say how much a thing weighs in the real. It asks whether it weighs there at all.

This is the question our time has stopped asking. Not: is it true? Not: is it sincere? Not: is it beautiful, or good, or right?

But: did it take place?

The question seems simple. It is radical, because it demands three answers at once: what remains of it, what had to be passed through, what did it cost?

The flow answers yes to all three by convention. It assumes that saying is enough, that declaring is as good as passing through, that wanting is as good as doing.

The formula answers: show what remains. Show what resisted. Show who did it.

In the next article, I turn to the most unsettling consequence of this formula: existence and truth are two distinct things. One can be right in a vacuum. One can lie with weight.

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