Can a City Be Relocated?
Exploring the Metaphysics of Context-Dependency

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Abstract

This paper explores the Persistence Question about cities, that is, what is necessary and sufficient for two cities existing at different times to be numerically identical. We first show that we can possibly put an end to the existence of a city in a number of ways other than by physically destroying it, which reveals the metaphysics of cities to be partly different from that of ordinary objects. Then we focus in particular on the commonly perceived vulnerability of cities to imaginary relocation; and we make the hypothesis that cities do have among their essential properties that of being surrounded by a specific geographical context. Finally we investigate the possibility that a city can survive relocation in virtue of the capacity of its geographical context to survive it in the first place. We suggest that city contexts may not be essentially context-dependent in turn, and outline a possible description of the criteria for their persistence over time.

Keywords: Persistence, Metaphysics, Essentialism, Context, City.

1. The Persistence Question about Cities

Generally speaking, the Persistence Question is a question about what is necessary and sufficient for two cities existing at different times to be numerically identical. Rising the Persistence Question about cities amounts to asking what is necessary and sufficient for a past (or future) city to exist now.

Indeed, to raise the Persistence Question about cities may appear pointless to many people. Firstly—the objection goes—it is very infrequent that a city may stop to exist. Cities normally persist for a much longer time than people. Moreover, they tend to stop to exist in connection to the collapse of a society, an empire or a nation. But these kinds of events are more and more rare in our global world. Thus, cities (differently from villages) can be supposed to stop to exist in the next future at even a smaller rate than in the past of human history. Secondly, when a city happens to stop to exist, there is no doubt about what has happened. In other words, events counting as a city stopping to exist tend to be highly

recognisable, in virtue of their necessarily consisting in the physical destruction of the city itself. Thus raising the Persistence Question about cities cannot be a useful philosophical activity.

We rebut that reasoning about the Persistence Question about x is always an excellent way to reveal what our concept of x is like. In fact, by exploring how x survives or not different kinds of change (no matter that some of them are not technically producible), we cast light on the most hidden characteristics of our very conception of x, metaphysically speaking. In particular, we can use thought experiments in order to investigate how, according to our best[1] intuitions and judgements, a city can survive some kinds of events and cannot survive others. This discloses what properties are constitutive of a city, and what properties are merely contingent. So thought experiments about cities reveal cities' metaphysical secrets. And increased awareness of the metaphysical nature of a city—how different it is with respect to that of ordinary objects; what kinds of items a city is dependent of; what kinds of items, on the contrary, do not ground its existence— may in turn affect our way of reflecting about cities, as well as governing, planning, bettering, living them.

Of course resorting to using thought experiments to explore how cities can stop to exist may reveal disappointing if a city could stop to exist only as an effect of a physical destruction of all or at least the majority of its parts (buildings, streets, and so on). Yet it seems to us that this is not the case.

2. How We Can Possibly Put an End to the Existence of a City other than by Physically Destroying It

Apparently, we can possibly put an end to the existence of a city other than by physically destroying it. This imaginary exploration may reveal that a city is subject to special persistence conditions that are partially different from those holding for ordinary objects.

A first scenario is the one in which the city is made inhabitable, e.g. by flooding it with water or exposing it to high levels of radioactive contamination. Yet it might be argued that, should Paris become inhabitable, it would remain Paris (at least during the first days after the change). We would not say that Paris no longer exists, but rather that Paris persists as an inhabitable city. Likewise, in case Manuel Fangio's 1956 Ferrari 290 MM just is made undrivable—e.g. by making its steering wheel stuck or extremely hot—we would not say that it no longer exists, but only that it persists as an undrivable car. On the other hand, one may parallel the contemplation of the inhabitable (and uninhabited) Paris with that of the physically intact, recently dead body of John.[2] Both may *seem* to be

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[1] Not every intuition we may have will be used to *determine* whether x survives or not different kinds of change. For example, after inspecting its logical consequences, we may decide to drop intuition N because the rival intuition N', whose content is that the logical consequence L of N is untenable, is stronger than N.

[2] As a comparative basis for exploring the Persistence Question about architectural entities and cities, we won't turn our nose up at making frequent use of the Persistence Question about persons. The comparison among architectural entities and cities, on one side, and persons, on the other side, may seem improper, if for no other reason than that a different class of items exists that appears more ontologically similar to the class of architectural entities and to the class of cities—i.e. the class of ordinary objects. We may expect the metaphysical properties of a cathedral, or a city, to be more akin to those of an armchair

persisting right now. But just as we go beyond visual appearance in the case of John—and admit that John has ceased to exist when he died a few hours ago, no matter that his dead body still persists—similarly we may want to say that Paris has ceased to exist when it has become uninhabited a few days ago, no matter that "its dead body" is still here. Indeed, we use to speak of "dead cities" in such cases.[3] Another point in common is that both the corpse and the inhabitable city are inexorably decaying since the occurring of the event making them dead and uninhabited, respectively—so that the illusion of the persistence of Paris and John will be rapidly blown away.

A second scenario is the one in which the entire population of the city is removed and substituted with a new one, coming from a very different part of the world, speaking a different language and maybe unaware of the existence—or at least of the main characteristics—of that city until the transfer (after which, however, the city is named exactly as it was before). Suppose that we substitute the entire "Parisian" population of the actual Paris (4,366,961 persons within the "inner ring" according to the NSEE 2008 census) with the same number of persons coming from Shanghai. Would Paris still be Paris after the change? The question is stimulating and highly disputable. If one embraces some form of the

than to yours and ours. Nonetheless we think that using persons as a comparative basis can be powerful and fruitful. One of the reasons is that, while the reasonable responses to the Persistence Question about architectural entities and cities outnumber those about ordinary objects, there is an almost one-to-one correspondence (mutatis mutandis) between the former and those about persons; and the arguments in favour and against each response are interestingly comparable. Secondly, when we care about the persistence of an ordinary object, we frequently are concerned about preserving it merely as a member of some category (e.g. the basic level category) rather than as a specific individual item. For instance, when we care about the persistence of an armchair, a refrigerator or a pair of glasses, we commonly are only interested in that they persist as members of the set of (comfortable) armchairs, (serviceable) refrigerators and (usable) glasses respectively, while the problem whether they also persist as the specific individual objects they were may easily remain out of the focus of our attention. When we deal with persons, the situation is very different: our caring about the persistence of a person is most of the times identical to our caring about the persistence of that specific individual person. Therefore if one is interested in posing the Persistence Question about individual buildings, such as the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, or about a city, such as Los Angeles, a comparison with the Persistence Question about persons seems more productive.

[3] Of course our having recourse to the Persistence Question about persons does not require cities to be persons or even organisms. Speaking of "dead cities" presupposes regarding cities as organisms, but we just take this to be a promising metaphor among many, like for example those of cities as machines, brains or political systems (Gerber and Patterson 2013; Nientied 2016). We do not agree with Varzi (forthcoming), however, that—as robust as the analogy among cities and organisms might be—it falls in that cities do not normally "die". We would rather say that cities seem to "live" longer than any organism we know, and to withstand kinds of events that would kill any organism we know. Still we can imagine some combinations of events that would "kill" a city. Varzi writes: "Think of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We dropped nuclear bombs on those cities. The aftermath photos are horrifying: all those buildings reduced to rubble, all those people vaporized. A devastating tragedy of incomprehensible scale. Yet the cities survived. Everything was rebuilt—homes, schools, temples, bridges, theaters." We reply that Hiroshima and Nagasaki might have survived not the nuclear bombs if, for example, all human survivors had moved to a different city, and no building was ever rebuilt. Therefore cities *can* "die", and even *do* "die". Only, their "death conditions" are different from those of organisms.

Actor-Network Theory, for example (e.g. Lees 2001; Jenkins 2002), it will be natural to conclude that Paris is no longer Paris, since the identity of a city is considered as fixed by the complex of attitudes, experiences, intentions and emotions gravitating to (indeed *inside*) it, as realised in the minds of their inhabitants, as well as by the attributing to it of certain functions, significance, aesthetic value, and so on—all factors which cannot but dramatically vary through sets of completely different populations.[4] On the other hand, it is easy to argue in favour of the opposite conclusion. It is easy to argue, for example, that Paris has been subject to a real and full change in population from 19th century to today, and this has not even threatened its persistence through time. Of course, this population change has been continuous and gradual rather than sudden and abrupt—but why should continuous population changes lack the power to threaten the identity of cities if sudden ones do possess it? And, if we imagine to suddenly substitute the 19th century Parisian population with the present one *within the 19th century Paris*—would *this* sudden population change be lethal to Paris as well? We assume that the majority of us would doubt it would be so.

Another possible way to put an end to the existence of a city could consist in destroying, removing or saliently transforming a certain number of its most well-known landmarks and monuments. In a sense, this may be considered as an act that physically destroys some proper parts of the city. As we are exploring the ways in which we can possibly put an end to the existence of a city *other than by physically destroying it*, this kind of change may simply fall outside of our target. Yet it is intriguing to ask whether Paris would cease to be Paris should we eliminate the Eiffel Tower—we guess that *this* would not be sufficient to menace Paris' persistence; and, to ask *when* we would start to hesitate among "yes" and "no" while we add to the list (the elimination of) the Pont Neuf, the Notre Dame Cathedral, the Conciergerie, the Saint-Germain-des-Prés church, the Louvre Museum, and so on. We assume most people will agree that, whatever the point along *this* continuum at which we start being uncertain whether Paris has ceased to exist, overall *a smaller part* of Paris will have been destroyed than that that it is necessary to destroy as a whole before we start to be equally uncertain about Paris' persistence if we simply proceed by destroying one building after another from East to West, or from North to South, or by chance. Such a comparison may reveal how dependent a city's identity is from its landmarks and top tourist attractions. Interestingly, we may discover that the architectural works and spots that are most relevant for the city's persistence according to its inhabitants do not match those which are considered as the top tourist attractions.

Another fascinating scenario is the one in which a city is split into two or more new cities—or, it is merged to another city. It seems to us that it is disputable whether a city can survive these kinds of change. In particular, while someone may want to presume that, when a city *T* is split into *n* cities, one (and no more than one) in the *n* cities *must* be numerically identical to *T*, we want to deny such a presumption.

To sum up, there are at least four ways of possibly putting an end to the existence of a city other than by physically destroying it. The first way consists in

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[4] The reader should be aware that the supporter of the Actor-Network Theory may hold that Paris can cease to be Paris also as an effect of some change in the network of relationships lesser than a population change—such as e.g. a change in people's beliefs, desires, abilities or social status, or in their mere spatial distribution.

making it inhabitable, and rests on the idea that a necessary condition for something to be a city is possessing a population. Thus—unlike the other three ways—making city T cease to exist through making it inhabitable requires making T cease to be a city at all. The second way consists in producing a sudden and total change in the population of the city. The idea is that a city can survive sudden *partial* changes or *slow* total changes, but not *sudden total* changes in population. If the latter occur, however, a city will continue to be a city: it will just cease to be *that* city. The third way consists in destroying, removing or saliently transforming a certain number of its landmarks and monuments. The underlying idea is that there is a critical mass of destroyed landmarks traditionally identified as distinctive of city T beyond which city T loses one of its essential properties. The fourth way consists in splitting the city into two or more cities, or, by merging it to another city. It relies on two general principles. The first principle says that, if city T exists at t_1 and cities U and V exist at t_2; and U is numerically different from V; and the only three possibilities are that (i) T at t_1 is the same city as U at t_2, or (ii) T at t_1 is the same city as V at t_2, or (iii) T has ceased to exist at t_2; and we cannot non-arbitrarily determine which of U and V at t_2 is the same city as T at t_1 despite knowing all the relevant facts, then (iii) is the case. The second principle says that, if cities T and W exist at t_1 and city Z exists at t_2; and T is numerically different from W; and the only three possibilities are that (i) Z at t_2 is the same city as T at t_1 and W has ceased to exist at t_2, or (ii) Z at t_2 is the same city as W at t_1 and T has ceased to exist at t_2, or (iii) Z at t_2 is a brand new city and both T and W have ceased to exist at t_2; and we cannot non-arbitrarily determine which of T and W at t_1 is the same city as Z at t_2 despite knowing all the relevant facts, then (iii) is the case. Note, however, that in the latter situation it is not necessary that (iii) be the case for T to have ceased to exist at t_2, because T will have ceased to exist at t_2 also if we can determine that (ii) rather than (i) is the case.

What can be said in conclusion is that, at worst, it is *open to question* whether we can put an end to the existence of a city other than by physically destroying it. Moreover, in many scenarios the intuitions and the arguments supporting a positive answer do seem no less powerful than their rivals.[5] However, there is

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[5] Interestingly, one anonymous reviewer suggested that an additional way to put an end to the existence of a city other than by physically destroying it could be by *fiat*—e.g. by making it become an independent state, or several villages from an administrative point of view. We are not convinced, however, that a mere *fiat* would have the force to make a city cease to exist. Accordingly the identity conditions over time for cities are relevantly different from those for mere institutional entities, because we can normally make an institutional entity cease to exist by simply destroying its status by a *fiat* (Jansen 2008). One could object that a specific *fiat* by the government or the safety authorities ("From this day forward, this city is off limits") *can* make a city cease to exist by making it inhabitable in the first place, no matter that no environmental condition would actually prevent it from being populated. But it seems to us that, also in such a case, the *fiat* alone is barely sufficient to make the city *inhabitable* in practice, and some supplementary physical factor is required—if only the deployment of law enforcement resources to make the ban respected. Following Weber (1921), one may suggest that a city is a space *essentially* characterised by the performance of some economic functions (consumption, production, and trade), so that the collapse of these functions would make the city cease to exist. Again, we doubt that this is true. We *can* imagine Paris or New Delhi to persist also in a scenario where their traditional economic functions are lost or have dramatically changed. One further interesting question

another important scenario to be explored: relocation—the case study we want to focus on in the present paper.

3. Relocation

It is intriguing to ask what happens to a city if we relocate it, that is, if we meticulously dismantle and rebuild it in a different place on Earth, paying attention to reassemble all of its parts exactly as they were before. Imagine that no proper part of the city is physically destroyed in the operation, and that not only we use exactly the same set of physical materials—such as bricks, reinforcing steels, and so on—but also have all of them playing exactly the same roles. For the argument's clarity, suppose that also its inhabitants are equally relocated so that there is no population change—otherwise you may be observing the metaphysical effects of a population change rather than those of a mere relocation. We assume that most people will judge that no city can survive this kind of change. One may speculate that the reason resides in the resulting climate change, or perhaps in the change in the quantity and quality of the sunlight. But again—once we concede that the new location, however distant from the original one, involves no significant change for climate and sunlight—we posit that most people will maintain their opinion. It seems that relocation by itself is perceived as a serious threat to the identity of a city. The relocated item would still be a city, of course; but it would be not the same city. Suppose that we try to relocate Paris in Nevada, USA. The majority's estimation is that Paris would not survive such a relocation. But why?

We make the hypothesis that the reason is that cities do have among their essential properties that of being surrounded by a specific geographical context. Relocating a city—no matter that its population, climate and relationship with the sunlight are preserved—entails altering this essential property, hence its being lethal to the city's persistence. In other words, cities are constitutively *relational* items, and cannot survive the deprivation of their external context—i.e. the physical geographical environment surrounding them, as constituted by material entities (such as woods, hills, mountains, roads, villages, other cities, the sea) and the properties exemplified by them. Therefore, cities turn out to be metaphysically different from ordinary objects and persons, whose identity is typically untouched by relocation. Rather they are similar to geographical entities such as mountains and rivers, architectural entities such as the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, site-specific works of art such as *Tilted Arc* by Richard Serra (Kwon 2002; Bacchini 2017),[6] location-specific food products like geographical indications (Borghini 2015: 728, 735), some specific culinary works (Bacchini 2018) and—surprisingly—nano-objects, whose essential characteristics seem to depend on

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is: can a city that has ceased to exist start to exist again—or, *resurrect*? If the answer is 'yes', can it do so only within a certain period of time? And, are we more inclined to acknowledge the capacity to resurrect to those cities that have ceased to exist without being physically destroyed (provided that we believe it possible for a city to cease to exist without being physically destroyed in the first place)?

[6] In 1985, Richard Serra stated that his 120-foot, Cor-Ten steel sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981) located in Federal Plaza, New York City, was "commissioned and designed for one particular site: Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such not to be relocated. To remove the work is to destroy the work" (Kwon 2002: 12).

their environment, in virtue of the unusual ratio between bulk and surface (e.g. Bensaude-Vincent 2013).

We do not intend to deny that cities may have some other essential properties, and that some other changes different from relocation may turn out to be lethal to their persistence accordingly. But among their essential properties there is the property of being surrounded by a specific geographical context. We call this position 'contextual essentialism'. According to contextual essentialism, it is *essential* to Paris to be surrounded by the woods of Île-de-France; it is *essential* to Rome that all its ancient consular roads connect it to those quaint villages and that typical countryside; and it is *essential* to Lisbon to lie on the Tagus river estuary.[7]

According to the stronger version of contextual essentialism, it is essential to a city not simply the property of being surrounded by a specific external context, but even that of being surrounded by a specific external context *in the specific way it is surrounded by it*, where a "specific way of being surrounded by a context" is characterised, among other things, by all the spatial relations holding among the item and the context. According to the stronger version, then, a city may be threatened also by a relocation consisting in a 180-degree rotation so that the district that previously faced the sea now faces the mountains, and viceversa.

We are aware that cities' inability to survive relocation can be explained also by saying that it is essential to a city to be located exactly where it is located, that is, in the particular part of Earth's surface it occupies. This formulation may seem to pick out the same essential property we refer to, but a more careful look tells us otherwise. Indeed, you can imagine to dramatically change the context a city is surrounded by while leaving the city in the particular part of Earth's surface it occupies. On the other hand, it is equally easy to imagine moving the city away from the particular part of Earth's surface it occupies together with its context— which would apparently leave its context untouched.

Once we acknowledge that we can imaginarily manipulate either one property without affecting the other, we must of course verify the change of which property precisely is detrimental to the city's persistence. It seems to us that—if we imagine relocating Rome together with its broader geographical context (say, the whole Italian peninsula)—the relocated city would be easily judged to remain Rome. By contrast, if we envisage to leave Rome in the particular part of Earth's surface it occupies while substituting the whole Italian peninsula with—say—the Honshu island (the largest and most populous island of Japan), it is likely that the majority of people would value the transformation to be lethal to Rome. We conclude that the essential property should be correctly identified as the property of being surrounded by a specific external context. On the same line of reasoning, Bacchini (2017) has argued that most architectural objects (typically, buildings) are such that to change their position would be to alter one of their essential properties, where this essential property should be identified as the property of being surrounded by a specific external context, rather than the property of being located in a particular part of Earth's surface. In a sense, the present paper should

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[7] The size of cities' geographical contexts can vary depending on many different factors. We will assume, however, that no city has a geographical context so small as to be negligible, and, on the other hand, that no city has a geographical context so wide as to correspond to a very large area of Earth such as, for example, a continent.

be seen as an attempt to extend to cities Bacchini's view of the explanation of buildings' metaphysical vulnerability to relocation.

   We do not want to deny that some people will have an intuition requiring that the essential property should be identified as the property of the city's being located in the particular part of Earth's surface it occupies. Call this position 'locative essentialism' (Casati and Varzi 2000). Basically, a locative essentialist holds that it is essential to a city to be located in the area of land it rises up in. Indeed, a locative essentialist may also want to express her position by saying that it is essential to a city to be located in a specific geographical region. But the latter formulation can also be seen as expressing the view we embrace—i.e. contextual essentialism—provided that we take a geographical region R to be identical with a set of features (typically specifying landforms) instantiable by one or more areas of land. If, on the contrary, we interpret a geographical region R to be identical with one particular area of land, then the statement according to which it is essential to a city to be located in a specific geographical region does count as a declaration of locative essentialism. But note that locative essentialism seems to be no other than a form of mereological essentialism after all (Chisholm 1973), since it can be reformulated as the view that among the essential parts of a city there are some that cannot ever be relocated—such as the particular area of a tectonic plate on Earth's lithosphere on which the city rises up, and perhaps others, like for example the "piece of sky" above it.[8] Although arguing against mereological essentialism is beyond the aims of the present paper, we just want to remark that it is a very problematic view, entailing many conclusions contrasting our common intuition (van Inwagen 2006)—especially so if applied to cities.

4. Adequate Criteria for the Persistence of Geographical Contexts

It seems to us that contextual essentialism must be coupled with adequate criteria for the persistence of geographical contexts, that is, with criteria that *do not entail* that a geographical context cannot survive any destruction or major change affecting one of its proper parts. Such combination is necessary in order to prevent a major objection, according to which the geographical context of every city we can think about—Paris, Rome, Lisbon, London—has importantly physically changed in the last centuries: villages have been created, houses have been built, forests have been destroyed, lakes have been drained, and so on. Provided that an essential property of the thirteenth century Paris is its being surrounded by its specific thirteenth century context (as we claim), positing that a geographical context cannot survive any destruction or major change affecting one of its proper parts entails that a city cannot survive it either. In other words, all the relevant physical changes from its thirteenth century to the present context would necessarily prove lethal to Paris. But just as Paris has survived the transformation affecting Paris itself, it has also survived the significant alteration of its context during the last centuries. So one that wants to embrace contextual essentialism must be prepared to provide criteria for the persistence of a city's context that can

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[8] Nonetheless one could question the idea that the particular area of a tectonic plate on Earth's lithosphere on which it rises up, or the piece of sky above it, are *parts* of the city.

prevent the disastrous conclusion that a city ceases to exist as soon as just one proper part of its context changes.

One possibility is modelling such criteria on the basis of how Parfit (1984) specified the psychological criterion for the Persistence Question about persons, according to which some kind of psychological relation is a necessary and sufficient condition for a numerical identity among entities existing at different times to hold, in a case in which at least one of the entities is a person. On the psychological criterion, the correct view of the Persistence Question about persons is a reductionist view, because the fact of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts that can be described in an impersonal way and do not presuppose the identity of that person or even its existence.

The basis that Parfit takes for his own revision of the psychological criterion is Locke's view, according to which, for a thing existing in the future to count as *you* existing in the future, it is necessary and sufficient that that thing has your memories, your beliefs, your passions (although not necessarily *all* of your present memories, beliefs and passions), and some other mental states that you have now. In Parfit's terms, it is necessary and sufficient that that thing is strongly psychologically connected with you now, where psychological connectedness is the holding of particular direct psychological connections (such as, the relationships among an experience and the memory of it, or among an intention and the action that follows from it, or among a desire existing at t_1 and the same desire persisting at t_2) and *strong* psychological connectedness is the holding of very many such connections.

But the story cannot be that simple. First, Parfit adds the requirement that this psychological connectedness has not taken a "branching" form, holding between one persons and two different things. Second, as Reid first objected to Locke, identity is transitive, while psychological connectedness (whether it be strong or not) is not: I am sure that the one year old boy my parents took to Venice in 1972 is me, although I must admit that possibly no specific memory, belief or passion belonging to that boy has been inherited by me today. On Parfit's revised Lockean view, P at t_1 is the same person as Q at t_2 if and only if (i) P is psychologically continuous with Q and (ii) psychological continuity has not taken a "branching" form, where psychological continuity is defined as the psychological relation realised by overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness. Differently from psychological connectedness, psychological continuity is transitive. While we may doubt that there are some direct memory connections between me today and the one year old boy my parents took to Venice in 1972, we can agree that there are many overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness between them.

In analogy to Parfit's version of the psychological criterion, we may say that X at t_1 is the same city context as Y at t_2 if and only if (i) X is persistentially continuous with Y and (ii) persistential continuity has not taken a "branching" form, where persistential continuity is defined as the relation realised by overlapping chains of strong persistential connectedness; in turn, persistential connectedness is the holding of particular connections realised by unproblematic instantiations of the relationship of identity over time of entities like forests, rivers, roads, houses and villages (such as, the relationships among a river yesterday and the same river persisting today, or among a small village on Monday and the same

small village persisting on Tuesday), and *strong* persistential connectedness is the holding of very many such connections.[9]

On this view, a city context can remain the same context—i.e. persist through time—also if it is affected by continuous physical transformation—just as a person persists through time in spite of her incessantly psychologically changing. The idea is that geographical contexts can persist in spite of the ongoing changing of their physical properties, regardless of whether the identity of some of the entities that are part of them is thereby distroyed. Note, however, that this is a reductionist view of the identity of contexts over time, just as is the view of personal identity over time based on the psychological criterion it is modelled after. This means that it rejects the idea that geographical contexts are separately existing entities, as well as the idea that the identity of contexts is a further fact that does not just consist in the identity of objects they are made of.

This position is able to explain why a major physical alteration of the context of a city during the last centuries (like for example that affecting the context of Paris from the thirteenth century to today) was not revealed as fatal to its persistence, even if the magnitude of the physical change may be bigger than that produced by a sudden relocation.[10]

Another basis for modelling adequate criteria for the persistence of geographical contexts may be found in Robert Nozick's closest continuer theory. According to this view, "to be something later is to be its closest continuer", where for y to be a continuer of x means that y's properties are the same as x's, resemble them, or at least grow out of them and are causally produced by them; for y to be the closest continuer of x means that y is closer to x than any other continuer; and closeness must be defined case by case by specifying which dimensions, or weighted sum of dimensions, determine it (Nozick 1981). Indeed, the closest continuer theory must be integrated by a theory of what closeness amounts to in the case of geographical contexts; and it is the latter theory, rather than the closest continuer theory itself, that would bear the burden of specifying the criteria of identity among contexts we look for. Thus Nozick's closest continuer theory seems to be more a complement to a view of continuity under identity like that outlined above than one of its rivals. Furthermore note that, as conceded by Nozick in general, a context may be the closest continuer to the context of city T without being close enough to it to be the context of city T. In other words, being

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[9] Indeed, Parfit distinguishes among a narrow view, which also requires that psychological continuity have the right kind of cause, and two wide versions, that allow any reliable cause, or any cause, respectively. The same distinction can be drawn with regard to persistential continuity.

[10] We are aware it could be questioned that psychological continuity is a necessary and sufficient condition for personal identity over time. Firstly, it may not be a necessary condition since apparently a temporary mental blackout briefly shutting down all psychological connections would not be detrimental to the persistence of a person if followed by a restart of mental life in the very same configuration it possessed before. Secondly, it may not be a sufficient condition since some slow yet severe and irreversible kinds of psychological transformation (say, gradual and permanent demonic possession) may count as lethal to personal identity in spite of their being compatible with the holding of overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness. Mutatis mutandis, the same worries could be raised with regards to persistential continuity as a necessary and sufficient condition for a city context identity over time.

the closest continuer of a certain context is at best only a necessary condition for being identical to that context.

5. Can a City Ever Survive Relocation?

One of the consequences of contextual essentialism is that *some relocations* of a city may not alter the city's identity, provided that also the context is relocated (and, its identity survives the change). However, contextual essentialism is clearly also compatible with the fact that no city relocation is ever possible; in fact, it might turn out that no city context can ever be relocated.

Consider that, on contextual essentialism, it is also possible that cities can survive some kinds of relocation also if cities contexts cannot ever survive any relocation. This is possible, for example, if we conceive geographical contexts as regions of space rather than complex (spatial) relations nets characterising single spots. In this situation, replacing a city *inside its original geographical context*, also if in a different position within it, would count as relocating it while preserving its context. In any case, as long as city contexts can be relocated, ceteris paribus also cities can be relocated.

City contexts might turn out to be immovable for a number of different reasons. For one thing, it might be that (differently from cities) city contexts essentially hold the property of being located in the particular part of Earth's surface they occupy. Or, suppose that they—just like cities—do have among their essential properties that of being surrounded by a specific *broader* geographical context. The position according to which a geographical context could only be relocated by relocating *its broader geographical context* may seem affected by an infinite regression; as a consequence, nothing could ever survive relocation that has some geographical contextual properties among its essential properties in the first place.

We believe that the infinite regression problem can be solved. Note that the solution we provide allows holding that any geographical entity or region of space—regardless of how extended it is—has among its essential properties that of being surrounded by a specific broader geographical context. Consider first an architectural entity like a building. Suppose you maintain that among its essential properties there is the property of being surrounded by a specific material context; and, call this context the "urban context" of the building (supposing that the building rises up in a city). We want now to distinguish between the city the building rises up in, on one hand, and the building's urban context, on the other hand. These are two different items admitting of different persistence conditions. In particular, relocating the urban context seems to us easier than relocating the city. In order to make the urban context survive relocation, you may only need to preserve its physical identity or even physical continuity. In other words, the urban context—differently from the city—does not seem to have among its essential properties that of being surrounded by a specific broader geographical context. So the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés can only survive relocation if its "Parisian context" is preserved; but it is possible to hold that the persistence of this "Parisian context" tolerates relocation much better than Paris itself, so that relocating the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés is not affected by the difficulty of relocating Paris in the first place.

The same line of reasoning holds for larger items such as cities. Like the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Paris is an essentially context-dependent item.

But when we distinguish among Paris' geographical context, on one side, and the region of Île-de-France, on the other side, we are able to posit that only the latter is in turn characterised by having among its essential properties that of being surrounded by a specific *broader* geographical context. Then we can envisage moving the geographical context Paris is essentially dependent on without necessarily moving the region of Île-de-France. This makes Paris movable in spite of both Paris and the region of Île-de-France having among their essential properties the property of being surrounded by their own specific geographical context. There is no infinite regression.

Regardless of whether we want to distinguish among a geographical region and the geographical context of an item (like a city) rising up in that region, of course, it is still possible that the infinite regression holds if also geographical contexts—like geographical regions—are revealed as being essentially context-dependent. Moreover, also in case they are not so, and accordingly there is no infinite regression, city contexts might turn out to be incapable to survive relocation because of some other reason.

One possibility is that a city context is immovable because of its being *vague*. If it is indeterminate whether one or more areas belong to the context, it might be impossible to determine where it exactly lies and hence what exactly has to be relocated. If the context's boundaries can be fixed only arbitrarily, then it seems impossible to decide which of an infinite list of partially overlapping geographical contexts should be moved. To make matters worse, vagueness involves a pernicious puzzle, i.e. the sorites paradox. In fact, assuming that an area A_1 belongs to the city context C, arguably an area A_2 adjacent to A_1 belongs to C too. By induction, any area A_n belongs to C, included any area that may lie thousands of miles away from C.

How can we solve this problem? Varzi (2001), following Russell (1923) and Lewis (1986), argues that vagueness in the geographical domain is semantic, not ontological. Namely vagueness is a feature of the terms by means of which we pick out geographical objects, rather than being a feature of the objects themselves. Thus, we can get around the problem by adopting an adequate semantic approach, like for example supervalutationism. The basic idea under a supervalutationistic semantics is that the name 'context of city T' is vague—i.e. there are some specific portions of Earth's surfaces that neither determinately are nor determinately are not the context of city T, or equivalently, there are some areas that neither determinately belong nor determinately belong not to the context of city T—because the name 'context of city T' admits of many different legitimate referents. When we put in making the meaning of a vague name or predicate more precise, we accordingly have many legitimate ways of doing it. Each way of making a vague name or predicate more precise is a *precisification*. A precisification is admissible if and only if every sentence that is determinately true (false) in English is true (false) in the precisification (Weatherson 2016).

Consider the statement B = "X belongs to the context of city T". Call S the set of all the areas (or even parcels of land) A_1, A_2, …., A_n such that substituting X with each area A_i, B is true under every admissible precisification of the predicate 'belonging to the context of city T' (or, equivalently, of the name 'context of city T'). We call S the 'minimal context of city T'. Then call S' the set of all areas A'_1, A'_2, …., A'_n such that substituting X with each area A'_i, B is true under some admissible precisifications of the predicate 'belonging to the context of city T', and false under others. We call 'enlarged context of city T' every area

mereologically composed by both *S* and at least one area that is a member of *S′*. We call the 'maximal context of city *T*' the biggest of the enlarged contexts of city *T*, that is, the one enlarged context of city *T* that includes all the members of *S′* as its proper parts. If you want to adopt a strict view of how vagueness must be contrasted, then what has to be moved in order to move the context of city *T* is the minimal context of city *T*. If you want to adopt a more liberal view, however, you can move any of the enlarged contexts of city *T*, included its maximal context. In any case vagueness is no longer a problem. In order to be able to relocate a city context, at worst you might have to previously pick it out from a set of equally good candidates—that is, just in case you adopt the liberal rather than the strict view. Note that each enlarged context seems to fully possess the status of being the geographical context of that particular city under the liberal view; and that apparently there is no difficulty for a city to have more than one geographical context.

Vagueness may also make it arbitrary to distinguish between the city and its context in the first place. Also this difficulty—however less serious to contextual essentialism—can be treated using the same approach; first we can identify as city *T* the minimal city *T* or else any of the enlarged cities *T*, and then we can identify its context as specified above.

6. Conclusions

There is at least one notable difference among the metaphysical nature of cities, on one side, and that of ordinary objects and persons, on the other side. The identity of ordinary objects and persons over time is normally thought to be untouched by variations in location. Ordinary objects like chairs, apples and books can be moved without threatening their identity. Similarly, people are normally considered to be the same after they have travelled or when they move to another country, and we ordinarily accept that anyone can survive her permanently moving from Paris to Tokyo if no particular accident occurs. By contrast, cities are not thought to normally survive relocation. Like architectural and geographical entities, site-specific works of art, location-specific food products, specific culinary works and nano-objects, cities seem to be very vulnerable to relocation.

We have advanced a view accounting for this fact, called 'contextual essentialism', according to which cities do have among their essential properties the extrinsic property of being surrounded by a specific geographical context. Cities turn out to be essentially relational, context-dependent items. We have shown how contextual essentialism is a better account of the metaphysics of cities than its main rival, i.e. locative essentialism. We have concluded that a necessary condition for a city to persist over time is the persisting over time of its context; and we have outlined a view of a city context's identity which is capable of explaining why some major physical alteration of the context of a city, such as that affecting the context of Paris from the thirteenth century to today, was not revealed as fatal to its persistence, even if the magnitude of the physical change is probably bigger than that produced by a sudden relocation.

If we are right, a city could be relocated in principle, since—as we have shown—there might be no metaphysical obstacle to moving a city context. In fact, geographical contexts—as distinguished from geographical regions—may not be essentially context-dependent in turn; and the difficulties normally due to

vagueness in the geographical domain can be solved by adopting a specific view of what vagueness is as well as an adequate semantic approach in order to dispel its fog.

We are aware that essentialism is not particularly trendy today in metaphysics in any of its versions. We should be prepared, however, to acknowledge essential properties whenever the explanatory advantages exceed the costs.[11]

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