The Phenomenology of Traffic

The book delves into the affective, embodied, and sensory dimensions of traffic and urban mobility. It brings together key phenomenological and post-phenomenological readings to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of urban traffic.

Through the experiences of traffic users in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, the book provides fascinating pathways into structures and processes that make up phenomenal traffic worlds. It explores the nature of the traffic experience, modalities of existence within it, and the wide spectrum of awarenesses involved in making sense from non-sense. The book offers rich theoretical insights on how we feel our way through our affect-laden worlds. Through empirical examples from the urban traffic in Ho Chi Minh City, the book explores this fluid, constantly changing complex collective of ongoing negotiations we call 'traffic,' often emotional, involving and producing all kinds of entities. It develops a range of philosophical concepts in order to better understand the complex relationships between humans and nonhumans in everyday settings.

Offering innovative insights into the structures, authorities, materialities, and forms of power that shape our experiences of traffic, this book will be of interest to students, scholars, and practitioners interested in philosophy, cultural geography, mobilities, transport studies, cultural studies, and urban studies.

Glenn Wyatt is a designer, illustrator, and lecturer with an interest in books, art, music, philosophy, and affect. He has lived in many countries, including Vietnam, Morocco, Italy, and Thailand.

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The Phenomenology of Traffic

Experiencing Mobility in Ho Chi Minh City

Glenn Wyatt

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Experiencing Mobility in Ho Chi
Minh City

Glenn Wyatt

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Acknowledgements

Some months ago, a friend and fellow expatriate in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) shared the news of his imminent plans to finally leave the city. His many years of accumulated experience here culminated in the somewhat resolute and definitive statement, something to the effect of, everything seems normal, but then you realize it's really not. Living in Vietnam as an expatriate is not for everyone; indeed, it may not even be for me, and yet I have stayed on for more than 10 years, as life continues to oscillate between the kinds of polar extremes that are seemingly part and parcel of living in a place that is both passionate and does not negotiate. Life in Vietnam can teach one many things, not least of all courage and resilience, two characteristics that Vietnamese people tend to admire, and foreigners who live in Vietnam generally fall into three different groups: those who leave after only a year or two, those who leave after 10 or 20 years, and those who never leave.

Though it exists under a single name and as one unified country, Vietnam is really a mix of quite different cultural areas, such as between the north and the south, and it is in the complex melting pot of HCMC that all of these mindsets, practices, tendencies, and attitudes intermingle and co-exist. My experience in Vietnam has been almost exclusively that of the south and of HCMC. When I first moved here, on perhaps only my second day, my colleague took me around the city on her motorbike. I remember being struck by an atmosphere so energetic and full of life that it seemed like a party, and yet it was neither a special event, nor even a Friday or Saturday night. There seemed just so much to take in with every glance that I didn't know where to begin; it was all movement and sound, so overwhelming that I found myself just treading water, as from looking down from a great height, whilst fighting the urge to jump. Like many others, what struck me was the traffic, which was then, aside from taxis, almost entirely made up of motorbikes; I remember saying to my new colleague, "I bet one can learn a lot about the Vietnamese just by looking at the traffic."

Since that day, I have racked up tens of thousands of kilometres on the only motorbike I have ever owned, my trusty red 125cc Honda Airblade. I have worked as a motorbike courier for my own enterprises, transporting

great loads of wood and other materials across all districts of the city from suppliers to factories, all strapped to the side of the motorbike, the weight of which, on one occasion, almost toppled me in front of an oncoming bus. Though I have witnessed countless numbers of traffic accidents, both minor and not so minor, miraculously, I have never had an accident that resulted in injury, but the near misses are too numerous to mention, and the probabilities are increasingly stacked in the wrong ledger column.

HCMC is filled with invitations and celebrations. It is filled with passion, love, hate, empathy, cold-heartedness and genuine warmth, and the constant buzz of sociality and of humanity on the move. It is a city of open doors that remain stubbornly closed, smiles and families, the sounds of children playing, and the noise of building construction, of freedom and football. It is a city of dreams and opportunities, and, yes, traffic. Journeys in Vietnam, into traffic or otherwise, require guides, and I am very grateful to those who have shown me things that, though they were always right in front of my eyes, I would never have known. I am grateful for all those who shared their experiences in traffic with me and especially for the assistance of Hien Nguyen and Hieu Hue Lieu for helping me to traverse the cultural complexities involved in research in Vietnam. I am also greatly indebted to Nguyet Huynh for her ongoing support, patience, and tireless efforts in dotting 'i's and crossing 't's. In a city constituted of constant tectonic shifts and change, I am grateful for the support, stability, and loyalty of Chau Tran, without whom this book would surely not exist. Whether eating goat hotpot by the side of the road or sampling local beer, together, like twin bookends, like two sentinel statues, such as often seen at the entrances to buildings, we look on, never missing a trick and always honing our senses to the winds of change that continue to blow through this amazing city.

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Preface

As a subject of investigation, the urban traffic in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) gives valuable insight into the nature of change and of how complex things are resolved and continually reinforced, thereby gaining stability over time. In this way, enduring things, as structures and patterns or as faded ghosts in varying guises, influence future outcomes and come to be an experience *of* time. In this book, the HCMC traffic, with the help of an integrated theoretical framework, provides fascinating pathways into structures and processes that make up phenomenal traffic worlds. Therefore, this is not really a book about traffic *per se*, but about the nature of experience itself and the wide spectrum of awarenesses involved in making sense from non-sense, as we feel our way through our affect-laden worlds. The choice of the HCMC traffic as the subject of these investigations is far from incidental, for this traffic system is a fluid, constantly changing complex collective of ongoing negotiations, often emotional, involving and producing all kinds of entities. With the right lens, the ghostly presences of traffic – immaterial flows, atmospheres, and affective timespaces – come to be foregrounded, revealing how the immaterial flows through the material and vice versa, coagulating, coalescing, and inspiring new novel events. The HCMC traffic is life in action, where what we call the ‘social’ and the ‘technological’ merge with and challenge our assumptions of that which we call the ‘natural’ realm.

After more than 10 years of experience living with, observing, and participating in this traffic system, I still find it constantly surprising. As with many experiences when living as a foreign expatriate in Vietnam, just when you feel confident to bask in the warm waters of understanding and clarity, the waters muddy again and you realize how little you know, how much there is to know, and how much can never be known. This book is the culmination of more than four years of empirical and academic research and more than a year spent writing and researching the book. It is clearly apparent that the traffic system that now exists in HCMC differs enormously from the one I first began researching, and even more profoundly from the traffic I first experienced here 10 years ago. Where once there were motorcycles dominating the landscape, there are now many more cars. Where once there were freelance motorcycle taxi riders sitting on street corners waiting

patiently for customers, there are now networks and infrastructures of Internet-based ride hailing applications, such as Grab, efficient and technologically complex.

Vietnam has a complex history, to say the least, and these past events continue to resonate, influencing certain kinds of outcomes in the present and beyond. Contemporary Vietnam, and, of note here, its urban traffic, is changing rapidly and exponentially through myriads of novel divergences, streaming towards myriads of futures, as the past inspires new becomings. As Grosz (2004) says, life always brings the resources of the past, of habit, instinct, memory, and learning to life's movement towards differentiation, which is "always directed to elaboration, complication, emergence," and to the "forward pull of time" (p. 255). The past, then, provides not only the conditions for the present but also the conditions for all possible, increasingly complex, futures that arise from the present, not as cause, but as virtuality and potential (Grosz, 2004); in other words, the past inspires, but in nonlinear ways that could never be predicted.

Novelty, the nature of experience, awareness, perception, and the experience of the passing of time, those processual *blackboxes*, where infinite potentiality gets knitted together into concretely existing actuality, are central concerns for phenomenology. The following comment from a traffic user in HCMC poetically illustrates the experience of riding a motorcycle in the HCMC traffic. This motorcyclist, who was new to HCMC and had only been riding in the city for about two months, commented to me some years ago, "You need to have five eyes to look around." At first glance, the traffic of HCMC appears extremely chaotic and disordered, but with experience, this apparent chaos begins to gain structure and order. Of course, a glance is a different mode of awareness to that of *being-in* and being emotionally involved, with something at stake. Successful participation and survival in this traffic collective requires the involvement of a wide spectrum of awarenesses. Events, and what Levinas calls "the staging of that which is the object" (as cited in Moran, 2000, p. 327), are filled with affect, ambience, and atmosphere, and the involvement of these more primordial pathways of negotiation, decision-making, and experience in traffic should not be underestimated. Non-representational dimensions such as emotions, tacit knowledge, the realm of the senses, and those vague feelings of the pre-conscious are fundamental to how we feel our way through traffic, as opposed to how we feel *about* traffic. The HCMC traffic system, with its history of bicycles and motorcycles, has evolved an aesthetic style fundamentally influenced by the movements and affordances of these kinds of vehicles as well as deep ways of being and cultural beliefs and practices. Its structure includes sets of constantly changing tacit collective agreements and informal rules and practices that exist alongside the formal traffic laws. Therefore, attunement to the ebb and flow of this system requires the development of awarenesses that are sensitive to subtle ways of being, affect, and atmosphere.

The structure of this book is such that each chapter builds upon the previous, more like a novel, gradually deepening and widening the scope of the subject matter over the course of the book. Therefore, it is recommended that the reader begin at the beginning and hang in there until the end, as the concepts build upon each other and open up new horizons, marrying theory and real-life empirical stories. Whilst it is common practice in academic books to summarize each chapter at the beginning and end of the chapter in question, I have chosen not to do so, but to let things emerge as they emerge, rather than expose the whole plot before we have even begun.

However, the following section provides short descriptions of each chapter. Chapter 1 introduces the aesthetic and general character of the traffic in HCMC, initially through the experience of a Vietnamese motorcycle rider. Drawing on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the chapter then raises the question of the relationship between the past and the creative evolution of present events within frameworks of kinetics, affect, and atmosphere. Chapter 2 outlines the aims and goals of the book. By way of an affective large-scale traffic event, this chapter describes some of the dynamics and forces that characterize the traffic in HCMC, suggesting the need for a more phenomenological, relational, and non-representational approach to the study of traffic. The chapter also outlines and contextualizes the approach and framework formulated in this book within the existing landscapes of current traffic research, for example, mobilities studies, as well as less sociological, more technological approaches, such as computer modelling and simulations. Chapter 3 focuses on the specific history of Vietnam and speculates on the ways in which past events continue to resonate through evolutionary processes that mould the traffic system in contemporary HCMC, from micro events to large-scale infrastructure projects. Chapter 4 describes Whitehead's notion of *the bifurcation of nature*, a view of the world as constituted, on one side, by universal objectifications of knowledge and scientific facts, and, on the other, as an experiential realm of affective intensities, emotions, sensorial experiences, and subjective concerns and values. The relevance of these ideas, especially in regard to the representation and experience of entities, objects, and infrastructures, is then discussed within the context of dominant traffic research approaches. Chapter 5 focuses on the notion and science of complexity and its potential for understanding the creative evolutionary processes of complex urban phenomena such as traffic systems, especially in relation to affect and atmosphere, and the project of the development of a *metaphysics of experiential complexity*. Drawing on affect theorists, such as Masumi and Manning, the embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and the ontology of 'feeling-tones,' as described in Whitehead's process philosophy, Chapter 6 draws us deeper into the nature of objects through empirical traffic events in HCMC. Staying with objects and events, Chapter 7 builds bridges between the eternal and the actual and between the past and the future, through discussions of the substantializing power of the immaterial and the abstract. Chapter 8 investigates the notion

of the ‘subject’ as both *feeler* and the *feelings being felt*, as an emergent outcome dwelling deep within infrastructures and networks of atmosphere and affect, and what Whitehead calls *lures for feeling*. Through empirical HCMC traffic stories, Chapter 9 further describes the ways in which HCMC traffic users navigate a phenomenon fundamentally constituted by rhythms, forms, intensities, and resonances, integrated into networks of nonhumans, using kinaesthetic sensibilities. Drawing on the notion of autopoiesis and Whitehead’s processes of *concrecence* and *transmutation*, Chapter 10, through empirical examples from HCMC traffic, explores how the infinite possibilities of random potential come to be experienced synaesthetically and kinaesthetically *as order*, and as relationalities imbued with meaning and significance, all manifested in a cohesive aesthetic style.

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1 The experience of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City

Recently, I met with a Vietnamese friend after work, in a quiet bar, conveniently located to both our apartments. Like most other traffic users in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), to get from home to work and vice versa, she rides her motorcycle through traffic conditions, the likes of which citizens in many other cities could not even imagine. This daily practice that one might refer to as the ‘mundane commute,’ in HCMC, comes with no small amount of danger and accumulated ill effects on health. Riding a motorcycle in HCMC might be a mundane activity, but that doesn’t mean that it is not a dangerous (and, perhaps, slightly crazy) thing to do, given the risks. For most, driving a car, or taking a taxi or Grab car is not economically viable, and given the lack of public transportation services in the city, my friend, like most others (like myself), has little choice but to enter this typhoon of sociotechnical manic activity, every day, and generally without complaint.

Over the many years we have known each other, my friend has, on occasion, shared with me some nostalgic memories of her childhood, of growing up in HCMC, where just to pass the time, she often leisurely rode her bicycle great distances around the city. Those nostalgic days of riding for leisure now seem firmly in the past. In HCMC, participation in the traffic forms a substantial and challenging dimension to one’s existence, and every moment my friend spends in the traffic, she contributes, unknowingly, to its current form, as it, equally unknowingly, contributes to the person I know as Châu. In the traffic in HCMC, we all “find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 50), in a world full of actualities that exist in the same sense as we do (Hosinski, 1993), vying for the right to move forward, but in a democracy where physical size matters.

From inside the bar, I watch as she parks her scooter on the footpath and removes some of her traffic apparel: helmet, gloves, ‘hoodie’ jacket, and facemask. She wears less additional ‘traffic’ clothing than many other female motorcyclists in the city, who have earned the name ‘ninjas,’ wrapped as they often are, from head-to-toe in traffic accessories that are worn over their regular clothes; stealthful and anonymous, yet in less clandestine

Figure 1.1 Negotiating for mobility rights in a common space. Copyright 2016 by G. Wyatt.

ways, somehow always managing to get in my way. As Châu enters the air-conditioned bar, with its warm yellow-lit ambience and quiet music, the traffic noise from outside briefly enters with her through the open door, temporarily changing the mood inside, a reminder of the vast difference between the two worlds. I turn to greet her, and, when closer, I am struck by her expression. I see signs of accumulated stress and exhaustion, so much so, in fact, that her face is almost frozen into a mask, as though she has just experienced a haunting. I know this person to be extraordinarily patient and forgiving, but I sense an imminent implosion or explosion, and so scurry to find her a glass of wine.

She sits down next to me, still looking somewhat harassed as her eyes stare out, unfocused, and unseeing. As she stares blankly, her body is still, but I imagine her mind is anything but immobile, perhaps still buzzing with ghost motorcycles, the constant beeping of horns, the smell of exhaust fumes, the roar of engines, and the kamikaze buses that career through the HCMC streets, forging their own paths like ice-breaker ships or snow ploughs. She removes her jacket slowly and consciously, as though intentionally *excommunicating*, as though it were a sacred rite that might shed the layers of dust, heat, and noise from which she has just been extricated. Yet, the quiet ambience of the bar still remains beyond her; she is yet to find it, yet to dwell in it. As her eyes and brain begin to focus again on the here and now, she picks up a menu from the table, but before considering its contents, turns to me, and with some resignation, but still that defiant resilience that comes with being Vietnamese, she says, “if Vietnam ever has another war, I know we will win again.” In a culture that prizes courage and confidence and does not shrink from a fight, vying for mobility rights can be a serious affair.

Edensor (2010) notes that “place is characterized by the mobilities that course through it” (p. 5), and the aesthetic character of HCMC would, no doubt, be a very different kind of place without its particular version of a traffic system.

For people new to HCMC (as well as some who are not so new), this is traffic that challenges our conceptions of what ‘traffic’ is or even *should be*, and it can be a common topic of conversation amongst Vietnamese locals and expatriates alike. Visitors to the city are often seen standing by the roadside taking videos of the traffic, as though they were witnessing the migration herds of wild animals, or simply looking perplexed, caught like an insect in an amber bubble of indecision and confusion, simply unable to figure out just how to cross the street. I suspect that this fascination resides in the fact that while the traffic contains the usual universal paraphernalia of traffic: traffic lights, stop signs, cars, etc., it operates according to a logic different to traffic in other cities. In other words, whilst it still looks like a duck, it doesn’t really seem to walk like one, and oftentimes, I hear visitors make comment that they are surprised not to have seen an accident or that “it seems to work,” a sentence uttered in complete amazement.

Mobility in the HCMC traffic system can be less like *commuting*, and more like surviving, striving, being prepared to leave everything on the fighting room floor if that is what it takes. This sounds negative, but, in many ways, the experience of being in HCMC traffic is a high-octane adventure, where one gets the chance to continually sharpen one’s skills, techniques, and wits, never quite knowing what might happen next. Bissell (2018), in

Figure 1.2 Traffic-themed graffiti in District 2, HCMC. Copyright 2019 by G. Wyatt.

4 Experience of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City

the introduction to his recent book on commuting practices, points out that the word *commute* comes from the term *commutation*, whereby multiple single railway passenger tickets were *commuted* into a single payment railway pass. To *commute* is to be subsumed into Fordist efficiencies and mundane modes of moving the masses: seamless, uniform, and homogenized. The term ‘commute’ conjures images of a bus ride home from the office through unexceptional suburbs or being shunted through the concrete caverns of a subway system, isolated in a crowd of nameless faces with eyes transfixed to smartphone screens, like rabbits in headlights, frozen under fluorescent glare. In contrast to this, the unique structures of *mobilization* in HCMC were not born of the efficiencies of Fordist paradigms, but, instead, grew out of a complex, multi-layered mix of histories, beliefs, rural practices, technologies, and colonial influences.

The *style* of mobility in HCMC seems much less like *commuting* and much more like being caught up in a blizzard of constantly changing heterogeneous materiality, a dynamic, buzzing, zipping high-stakes chess game, and one Vietnamese scholar (Phạm, 2012) has made comment that the traffic in Vietnam is growing so fast that it is completely reconfiguring the traditional structure of society. My friend, on arriving at the bar, feels, I suspect, as though she has just been through some kind of war zone, not quite unscathed, in an environment where ethics are evolving parallel with emerging traffic practices. Most people who have lived some years in the city will say that the traffic has changed enormously in recent years and now seems more dangerous, perhaps because it is more heterogeneous, with many more cars, buses, and trucks, the speeds are faster, and the margins for error are becoming narrower. As cars increasingly dominate the physical space, often taking over the motorcycle lanes, an atmosphere brews in the traffic like a pressure cooker, an affective presence that has a profound influence on the emergence of new practices.

Sherburne, a scholar of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, quoting the French poet François Villon, asks, *Où sont les neiges d'antan?* “Where are the snows of yesteryear and how are they related to the present?” (cited in Sherburne, 1967, p. 253). Sherburne points out that Whitehead’s answer to this would lead directly to God and that the past is preserved in the eternal realm, objectively immortal in his consequent nature. For Whitehead, it is God who sets up the initial conditions at the base of things, at the base of events, providing the seeds that inspire aims, cues, and relevance, resulting, over time – indeed, *creating* time – in outcomes of order that gel, if you like, with the unity of the universe. To view the HCMC traffic through Whitehead’s ontology is to see it as constituted by events, varying in structural complexity, where God is seen as the divine orderer (Whitehead, 1978). Not to say that the kinds of order that result from these processes are pre-ordained or without autonomous creativity – creativity is central to Whitehead’s scheme – but rather that the initial conditions set up by God limit or condition these creative processes

(Whitehead, 1978) and therefore mediate the kinds of forms that emerge. Whitehead's scheme relies on the preservation, in the eternal realm, of all that has ever been in actuality – such as in Vietnam's past – which then, through God, finds its way back into the primordial processes that create the actual universe. However, whilst the traffic in HCMC might be seen as constituted by events, it is not the events themselves that endure over time – when an event is gone, it is gone (Whitehead, 1920) – but it is enduring forms that go on to inspire novel future outcomes. For Whitehead, God is viewed as the only possible means by which the past may be given in the present, because he endures eternally and exists outside of time, and therefore, God *is* the ontological ground for the “somewhere” of eternity (Sherburne, 1967, p. 252).

Whitehead's process philosophy provides illuminating ways to view the complex processes and relationships through which eternal possibilities become concretely actualized. However, the existence of the entity ‘God’ in this scheme remains problematic for some scholars (Sherburne, 1967), existing almost as a kind of *deus ex machina*, a necessity existing beyond the temporal realm, and therefore able to create time itself. To consider Whitehead's metaphysical scheme *sans* God is to raise a number of productive questions, such as by what processes and dynamics do enduring ‘things’ reach in from the past and affect contemporary events, causally speaking, what is the nature of such enduring forms, how are they passed on, and where they reside whilst waiting to play their part?

Since Whitehead's time, the science of complexity – the notion of which is still open to debate (Corning, 1998; Érdi, 2008) – has evolved frameworks, definitions, and characteristics of systems that are dynamic and constituted through nonlinear relations, such as urban traffic systems. One of the most important characteristics of complex systems is a profound sensitivity to their histories, which fundamentally influences how they evolve over time. The endurances that resonate through the complex system that is the traffic in HCMC, for example, may have their seeds in historical events, but like Whitehead's God, they inspire outcomes in the contemporary world in ways that are impossible to predict or even to causally connect. Vietnam's ‘snows’ of yesteryear are characterized by the kinds of chaos that evolve in conditions of war, and this is a past that also includes years of extreme poverty, famine, and the complexities of colonialism. The question arises as to how this unique history might live on in the complex nonlinear dynamics that contribute to contemporary practices in Vietnam, for example, in its urban traffic. This is not to say that Vietnamese people *consciously* dwell in this history of war, but neither do they forget. There are many reminders of this history that are formally instituted in daily life, such as in commemorations of past events or in the names of streets, but HCMC is a young city, with much of its population born after the war (in fact, the population of Vietnam itself has the median age of 30 (CIA World Factbook, 2017), and, therefore, is future-oriented). Nevertheless, the forms that arose from this past

6 Experience of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City

linger on in subtle and complex ways, inspiring new structures, atmospheres and affects, relationships, and patterns of practices.

The HCMC traffic system, like an open blackbox, offers significant opportunities to observe how such an enormously complex and dynamic assemblage creates itself over time, responding to needs and evolving via a potpourri of often competing agendas, plans, and aims. At the level of the individual traffic user, this contribution occurs, not through conscious reflection and deliberation (who has the time for this?), but by way of entities engaged in what Dreyfus calls *absorbed coping* and what Noë (2012) calls *unthinking attunement* (p. 7).

HCMC traffic users are continually absorbed in kinetic forces, entangled in unseen enduring structures and reacting to ephemeral affective atmospheres, coping as best they can, often in extremely difficult conditions. As HCMC goes, in the words of Thrift (2008), “howling into the unknown” (p. 114), the nature of its traffic seems driven by nothing more than a “being-toward-movement” (Sloterdijk, 2006, p. 38), to exist is to move, as infrastructural forms conform to the emergent outcomes of the traffic itself, a kind of *kinetic materialism*.

Katz (1999), in his book *How Emotions Work*, says:

Although people are intimately familiar with and vividly touched by the forces that shape their lived experiences, the critical shaping processes work like habitually worn eye glasses: they are transparent to the person even while, by structuring perception, they critically influence the person’s response to his/her environment. (p. 8)

Figure 1.3 Sometimes things just need to be transported quickly and inexpensively.
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To engage with the traffic in HCMC can never be half-hearted, and it requires commitment, faith, belief, skill, trust, concentration, more than a little nerve, and, perhaps, the ability not to critically think about it too much. Like water for fish, we swim in fluid infrastructures of felt intensities and affective atmospheres, and no matter how intense the experience, as riding a motorbike in HCMC testifies, any practice might still become mundane, even if a *mundanity* of intensity.

In conjunction with Vietnam's unique historical legacies, as the country continues to open out to the world, other contemporary forces of modernity and mobilization also rush in, forces described by Giddens (2012) as "like being aboard a careering juggernaut rather than being in a carefully controlled and well-driven motorcar" (p. 53). Atkinson (2015) describes the atmosphere in HCMC as "a kind of euphoria where much of the population feel like they have arrived in the modern consumer world" (p. 857), but, as the philosopher Sloterdijk (2006) says, there exists military connotations, even in the term 'mobilization' itself. Sloterdijk (2006) states that "kinetics is the ethics of modernity" (p. 37), which raises the question as to whether the kinds of ethics and practices emerging in HCMC traffic via strategies of *absorbed coping* are, perhaps, emerging out of what Sloterdijk (2006) calls "moral kinetic automatism" (p. 38), reflective of the essence of *mobilization* itself, the modern form of which Sloterdijk describes as a "category of a world of wars" (p. 40). Truitt (2008) describes HCMC as a city "besieged" by motorcycles (p. 3), and news sites report vehicles fighting for space on the streets (Khanh An, 2015) and an increase in fights, sometimes using weapons, breaking out as a result of traffic incidents (Tran, 2014). Nghiêm Cường, a Vietnamese reporter who has broken his arm twice in two separate traffic accidents, states:

If you can drive a car or bike in Vietnam, you can drive anywhere in the world. . . . We have rules but most people don't follow them and just ride the way they like. . . . Crashes here are very frequent. I see them every day. (Bryant, 2014, para. 1)

In this traffic system, ethics and morals do not exist in quiet contemplative ideological vacuums; we are not monks on motorcycles (except for the monks, who are, in all probability, actually monks on motorcycles). Instead, they emerge from out of – and, in fact, are part of – contingent concrete realities; yet, despite the obviousness of this statement, we continue to believe the state of affairs to be the other way around: that our attitudes and ideologies come first, and that it is independent, autonomous conscious thoughts that control and drive our behaviour.

Our individual destinies are profoundly influenced by, and connected to, the destinies of our urban environments, upon which it seems we have little control. As an individual being, I have my own hopes and goals, but this individual autonomy is limited (in the same sense that Whitehead's

God limits the fundamental creative processes that create nature) by the intrinsic programs that constitute me as a biological being, the systems I am embedded in, and the relationships that give meaning to my existence; I am not, in any real sense, a free and clear agent. Merleau-Ponty (1968) said, “it is not I who makes myself think any more than it is I who makes my heart beat” (p. 221). My autonomy as an individual, my actions, my feelings, and – as Merleau-Ponty points out – the *direction* of my thoughts are inseparable from the programs, modes, affordances, and ‘aims’ of systems, networks, protocols, and programs, the intimate relationalities that form the inhuman and nonhuman collectives within which I am a component. I drive, therefore I am, and my intentions and goals are intrinsically intertwined with the mobile infrastructure that we call ‘driving a car’ or ‘riding a motorbike.’

Phenomenology has an uneasy and entangled relationship with metaphysics, but the way into the latter may well be by way of the former, just as much as the way into the former, be via the latter:

Phenomenology, as an analysis of the origin of the world, is thus anything but a glorification of man as master of himself. On the contrary it shows him, by its results, as bound by, and under the authority of, a world order; and thus, metaphysics wins back that function which, from its nature, it has always had, and must have: the function of *reminding man of the bond which ties him to this order*. (Landgrebe, 1949, p. 205)

Figure 1.4 Child seats for motorcycles in parking area of apartment building. Copyright 2019 by N. Huynh.

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