

In the opening chapters of *Ennead* III.6 [26], *The Impassibility of the Bodiless*, Plotinus claims that the soul is exempt from *alloiōsis*, *kinēsis*, and *pathos* (a position I will call the “impassibility thesis”). Some scholars understand the impassibility thesis as a denial of any and all change to the soul (Emilsson), others as a denial that the soul is subject to the body’s influence (Blumenthal). But neither of these interpretations can be right. For among the occurrences in the soul that Plotinus aims to explain are transitions between relatively stable states of soul, e.g. from ignorance to knowledge, and such transitions are clearly changes. And Blumenthal’s position that the body should have no influence on the Plotinian soul is at odds with Plotinus’ view that physiological changes can prompt psychic occurrences.

Rather, as his programmatic remarks at the beginning of *Enn.* III.6 suggest, when Plotinus claims that the soul is impassible, what he intends to deny to the soul is the mode of qualitative change characteristic of bodies. Although there are some *prima facie* reasons for thinking that psychic changes take the same form as bodily changes, serious problems arise for the Platonist who assumes that psychic and bodily changes are to receive the same analysis. In the qualitative changes that pertain to bodies, i.e. changes of sensible quality, that aspect of the thing that the change affects does not survive the change. Applied to souls, which are immaterial beings and, therefore, wholly constituted by substantial-form, any such destruction must apply to the soul’s substance. So the assumption that occurrences in the soul are of the same type as the qualitative changes of bodies implies that the soul’s nature changes whenever any psychological event occurs!

In order to address this problem, Plotinus presents a separate analysis of how the soul acquires its activities and stable conditions, one compatible with the Platonist commitment that the soul is immaterial. On Plotinus’ view, the soul has its states, whether these are activities or stable psychic conditions, by engaging some one of the cognitive capacities that constitute its nature. Since the integrity of the soul’s psychic powers is not compromised by their engagement, Plotinus has the theoretical resources to account for changes and activities in the soul without thereby facing difficulties for the persistence of the soul’s nature over time.

Thus, psychic change differs from physical change both in *the type of property acquired* (a cognitive state rather than a sensible quality) and in *the mode of its acquisition* (by the engagement of an ability to act rather than by the replacement of one sensible quality by another). And to signal that bodily and psychic change are fundamentally different categories of change, Plotinus restricts the application of terms traditionally used for changes of sensible quality (*alloiōsis*, *kinēsis*, *pathos*) to physical changes, while adopting “*energeia*” as the denomination for the activities and stable conditions that the soul acquires by the engagement of its cognitive capacities. The “impassibility thesis,” then, is not a denial of change in the soul, or of bodily influence on the soul, but rather an expression of Plotinus’ attempt to develop and articulate for Platonism a distinction between physical and psychic change.