Aristotle’s action theory establishes a distinction between two different kinds of akrasia: weakness (astheneia) and precipitancy (propeteia). The characteristic feature of weakness is that the agent, having deliberated about how best to achieve a certain goal and based a choice on his deliberation, acts against choice (para proairesin). It is this type of akrasia that modern action theorists refer to when they speak of ‘incontinence’ or ‘weakness of the will’ in Aristotle. But precipitate akrasia differs substantially from weakness. Its characteristic feature is that the agent is led by his desires for pleasure because he has not deliberated at all. In this case, the agent does not act against a previous deliberated choice or proairesis, because there is none to be acted against. It is nonetheless a case of akrasia, or ‘lack of self-control’, precisely because of the lack of restraint that is manifest in the agent’s following whatever appears to him to be pleasant. Thus, weakness and precipitancy are both irrational, but in different ways. Weakness is irrational because the agent acts against reason, which is present in his psychology in the form of a choice based on a prior deliberation. Precipitancy, by contrast, is irrational because reason is absent from the agent’s psychology altogether: he simply did not form a choice based on a prior deliberation.

It is well known that in the central chapters of the seventh book of the Nicomachean Ethics devoted to akrasia Aristotle does not pay as much attention to precipitancy as he does to weakness. But something that is less well-know is that precipitancy—and under that very name: propeteia—was given considerable attention in Roman Stoicism by Epictetus. Why was Epictetus, in contrast with Aristotle, interested in this phenomenon? One possible answer is that it poses a difficulty for the ascription of responsibility that arises directly from earlier Stoic theories of responsibility, which are of course later than Aristotle. An important element of early Stoic thinking about responsibility is that to

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1 See *NE* VII 7, 1150b19–22. Cf. 10, 1152a18–19.
be responsible for an action it is sufficient that the agent acted from a
decision or impulse that is based on a prior reasoning. The thesis may
be attributed to Chrysippus and the motivation that underlies it is that,
if the thesis is correct, responsibility does not require, in addition, the
possibility to act otherwise. And this would prove that the libertarian
is wrong in insisting that this possibility is a necessary condition for
responsibility. Now, the Chrysippean thesis leaves it unexplained why
agents who act without any prior reasoning may also be responsible. And
here comes the philosophical problem that motivates Epictetus’ interest
in the phenomenon of precipitancy. If the reason why reflective agents
are responsible is that they are convinced by their reasoning that they
should act as they do, why should precipitate agents be responsible if
they do not carry out this sort of reasoning? Although Epictetus agrees
with Chrysippus on the idea that the kind of reasoning envisaged by
Chrysippus is sufficient for responsibility, he complements the latter’s
theory by providing an explanation of why actions done in the absence
of reason may also be responsible. Thus it is because of Chrysippus that
Epictetus came to be so interested in precipitancy and this may be why
his interest in the phenomenon is at least greater than Aristotle’s. In the
present essay, I shall argue that Epictetus’ argument for the ascription of
responsibility to precipitate agents hinges on the idea that precipitancy
is in itself a condition that one ought to avoid. In consequence, if I
behaved badly because I acted precipitately, my precipitancy cannot
count as an exculpating factor. I therefore become genuinely liable to
blame and punishment for my behaviour. This argument (henceforth
the ‘Normative Argument’) rests on a certain conception of human
nature that I shall explore in some detail.

The present paper is divided into two sections. Section 1 deals with
the nature of precipitancy in Epictetus. It is brought out through a
comparison between the psychology of precipitate action and the
psychology of action of the fully rational agent. Section 2, is devoted
to discussing the central thesis of the Normative Argument, namely,
that precipitancy is not an exculpating factor inasmuch as it is in itself
a condition that we ought to avoid.

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2 This interpretation of Chryssippean compatibilism is argued for in detail in chapter 4 of Salles (2005).