In [1], a recent article in this journal, John Fischer criticizes a version of the argument for the incompatibility of freedom and determinism formulated by me. He alleges a familiar sort of dilemma: if a certain key notion is interpreted in one way then the argument has one flaw, if in another way, then another flaw. I wish to respond to his objections.

My argument makes use of a propositional-operator-form (i.e., what would be a propositional operator but for its containing free variables) whose English expression is

"p and it was not in agent s’s power at time t to make it not the case that p”.

Let this be abbreviated by

"Nstp’’.

If we insert universal quantification on the agent-variable, “s”, we create another propositional-operator-form:

"p and, for any s, it was not in s’s power at t to make it not the case that p”.

Let this latter be abbreviated by

"N_tdp”.  

If we insert universal quantification on both variables, we create a propositional operator:

"p and, for any s and any t, it was not in s’s power at t to make it not the case that p”.

Let this last be abbreviated by

"Np”.
The argument assumes the validity of the following principles of inference involving this operator or the preceding operator-form:

(a) It is logically necessary that \( p \).

\[ \therefore \neg p \]

(b) \( \neg (\text{if } p \text{ then } q) \). \( \neg \neg (\text{if } p \text{ then } q) \).

\[ \neg p \]

\[ \therefore \neg q \]

\[ \therefore \neg n q \]

(c) The laws of nature entail that \( p \).

\[ \therefore p \]

(d) Everything needed for it to be true that \( p \) happened before \( t \).

\[ \therefore \neg t p \]

If the principles (a)–(d) are indeed valid, then the argument I formulated shows that from the hypothesis of determinism it can be deduced that: for any truth \( p \) as to what happens in the world, \( \neg p \). That is, given (a)–(d), if determinism is true then no one ever has it in his/her power to make events take any course other than the one they actually take. Fischer acknowledges this and that (a)–(d), considered one by one, may well seem to be valid. But he argues that there is no single interpretation of all of (a)–(d) that makes them all valid.

The expression in which Fischer locates the key ambiguity is “It was in S’s power at \( t \) to make it the case that ...”. Fischer sees two plausible interpretations (p. 130):

(i) \( S \) had it in his/her power at \( t \) to cause it to be the case that ...

(ii) \( S \) had it in his/her power at \( t \) to perform some act \( e \) such that if \( S \) had performed \( e \) then it would have been the case that ...

If we unpack “It was in S’s power at \( t \) to make it the case that ...” into “It was in S’s power at \( t \) to act in such a way that if \( S \) had so acted then \( S \) would have made it the case that ...”, then Fischer’s ambiguity is located in the expression “\( S \) made it the case that ...”. The interpretation of this latter expression used in Fischer’s (i) is

(i*) \( S \) caused it to be the case that ...

and the interpretation used in Fischer’s (ii) is simply

(ii*) It was the case that ...