It has become clear to you that every attribute that we predicate of Him is an attribute of action or, if the attribute is intended for the apprehension of His essence and not of His action, it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question. (Guide of the Perplexed I, 58)

In The Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides classifies predicates into those that signify (i) definitions, (ii) parts of definitions, (iii) qualities, (iv) relations, and (v) actions.¹ The issue that concerns him is whether any attributes are truly predicable of God. He goes on to argue that only the last category, attributes of action, are predicable of God. The others would result in false propositions. Thus, he reinterprets any reference to traditional divine attributes as signifying either negative attributes or attributes of action.

A reinterpretation in terms of negative attributes amounts to talk about God's essence. But such talk cannot say what God is; it can only say what God is not. More specifically, Maimonides contends, we may ascribe perfections to God, provided we mean to deny the corresponding imperfection. Thus, we can say “God is powerful” and “God is knowing,” but these ascriptions are intelligible only if we understand them to mean, respectively, “God is not weak” and “God is not ignorant.” A reinterpretation in terms of attributes of action, on the other hand, does not refer to the divine essence at all. Instead, it amounts to talk about the effects of divine agency in the world. Thus we can say “God is just” provided we mean by this that God produced a just event or state of affairs; similarly to say “God is knowing,” on this reinterpretation, means that God produced an intelligent, orderly world. Ascribing actions to God in the way Maimonides suggests purportedly avoids those difficulties that generate a negative interpretation of divine attributes.

Here I want to explore the philosophical import of Maimonides' attributes of action. In particular I want to address the following questions: How do attributes of action logically differ from other predicates? What justifies their affirmation of God? Do such affirmations avoid those difficulties that generate a negative interpretation of divine attributes? I intend to show that in attributes of action Maimonides proposes a viable alternative alongside negative language about God—an alternative that mollifies the usual charge of agnosticism.

I

While recent commentators have focussed, both critically and constructively, on Maimonides' so-called negative theology, they have tended to gloss over the other aspect, namely, a reinterpretation of attributes as actions.\(^2\) I. M. Bocheński, for instance, analyzes the logic of negative attributes but not that of attributes of action.\(^3\) In a recent study comparing Avicenna, Maimonides and Aquinas, David B. Burrell remarks,

Because Maimonides could not see how we could alter our characteristic manner of attributing when it came to divinity, nor could he attenuate the traditional confession that God is one, he had recourse to a radical agnosticism regarding the statements we use to praise God....\(^4\)

However, it is not obvious that the charge of a radical agnosticism stands up in light of Maimonides' attempt to provide a positive way of talking about God in terms of actions. Yet Burrell gives no consideration to attributes of action and their apparently distinct logical status in Maimonides. Alexander Broadie correctly summarizes Maimonides viewpoint on attributes of action:

