Whether human beings can know God, and, if so, by which way, is a matter of discussion within the Islamic tradition. Muslim philosophers, theologians and Sufis have had heated discussions on this issue, and fundamentally different views have been set forth. As a result of these debates, the existence of more than one way to such knowledge became apparent, and it proved difficult to rule out the validity of any of the various alternatives completely. That is why we see in the writings of the great figures from the later generations of the Islamic tradition an attempt to include these different ways into their respective theories somehow. In this article, I will discuss the approaches of two leading figures of the Islamic tradition to the nature, sources and limits of metaphysical knowledge, in particular to knowledge of God. The first figure I wish to consider is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), one of the leading thinkers not only within the Ashʿarite school, but also within Muslim theology in general. His main achievement was to harmonise philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā, with Muslim theology, and produce a kind of philosophical theology that exerted significant influence upon later theologians. The second figure is Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), hailed as the ‘Greatest Master’ in Sufi tradition and responsible for a deep and pervasive influence over the intellectual life of later generations. For the purpose of this article, I will compare their approaches using the following three questions. First, is it possible for human beings to have knowledge of God and does this knowledge include God’s existence, essence and attributes? Second, can human beings reach certainty in this area, or do they have to be satisfied with the most appropriate opinion among the alternatives? Finally, what is the way that leads human beings to knowledge of God? Both Rāzī and Ibn ʿArabī state that there are two ways for human beings to attain the knowledge of God, namely, unveiling and reasoning. I will discuss how they evaluate these two ways and whether they consider them to be alternatives or complementary.

Before entering into discussion of Islamic understandings of attaining knowledge of God, a brief reminder of the classification of the sciences, the
position of metaphysics within this classification, and the subject matter of metaphysics is necessary. As in many other issues, it is evident that both Rāzī and Ibn ʿArabī were heavily influenced by Ibn Sīnā in relation to the classification of sciences and the position of metaphysics within them. However, it seems that they differ slightly from Ibn Sīnā on the question of the proper subject matter of metaphysics. For Ibn Sīnā, the proper subject matter of metaphysics is that which exists inasmuch as it exists, in other words, ‘being as being’ as Aristotle says, and on this issue Ibn Sīnā criticises those who claim that the subject matter of metaphysics is God or causes in general. When Rāzī’s earlier works are compared with his final work, Al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya min al-ʿilm al-ilāhī, it seems that his understanding of metaphysics has changed from that of Ibn Sīnā’s to the one that Ibn Sīnā criticises, namely, that the subject matter of metaphysics or, as Rāzī calls it, al-ʿilm al-ilāhī is God. This change of understanding regarding the subject matter of metaphysics is continued with Ibn ʿArabī, for whom metaphysics or gnostic science (maʿrifa), as he names it, deals primarily with the Real (al-Ḥaqq) or God, who is identified with the absolute being (al-wujūd al-muṭlaq). Furthermore, this understanding is reiterated by his student, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī, who writes that the subject matter of metaphysics is the existence of the Real, rather than that which exists inasmuch as it exists.

For Rāzī in Al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya, metaphysics is the highest science, and it derives this position, first, from the subject matter that it deals with, since it primarily deals with God and His attributes. A number of proofs can be given for God’s being the highest being, but for Rāzī, the best proof is to state that God is beyond comparison with any other being. Second, it is the highest science because its ultimate purpose is to attain real or ultimate happiness. He argues that metaphysical concerns lead man to spiritual pleasure, which is the ultimate happiness, and the highest pleasure is achieved with the possession of the knowledge of God and His attributes. The more man concentrates on this metaphysical endeavour, the deeper his desire will be both to turn away from

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