Orthodox Islam teaches that God knows every existent in the temporal world, be it an event or an entity, and that this knowledge applies to past, present and future times. This idea is well attested in the Qur’ān, according to which God even knows thoughts. Thus, nothing escapes His knowledge. As in other theological issues, the Muslim theologians did not content themselves with Qur’ān verses and tried to prove God’s knowledge, especially His knowledge of the particulars in a logical way. Logical proofs were needed, since the philosophers denied God’s knowledge of the particulars on the ground that, e.g., His essential unity and simplicity contradict a knowledge which supposedly divides His essence.

The theologians learned God’s knowledge of the particulars through several arguments. They inferred it from the notion that God creates everything through His free will; God must know the objects He willed. They also gathered this knowledge from the perfection observed in things; only whoever knows the particulars can create such perfect, well designed and purposeful things. According to al-Ghazālī, God’s will and His knowledge of this will entail His being living, and every living being is conscious of things other than its own self, hence God knows Himself and other things. Al-Hilli and al-Ījī deduced God’s knowledge of the particulars from His power.
The philosophers, on the other hand, had different views. They were divided, as reported by al-Ȭmīdī, on this issue, into three groups: a. Those who absolutely denied God of knowledge, whether it is knowledge of Himself or of other things. b. Those who affirmed only God’s knowledge of Himself. c. Those who affirmed God’s knowledge of things other than Himself, but limited this knowledge to the universals. In al-Ghazālī the first group are the Neoplatonic philosophers who held that the world necessarily emanates from God. This emanation implies depriving God of the attributes of will and knowledge, and hence of life. And whoever is not living cannot know himself. However, the Neoplatonic philosophers themselves thought that God knows Himself. The second view is that of the Aristotelians. Most of the Muslim philosophers belonged to the third group. They argued that in order to know the particulars one must have senses and imagination which are inadmissible with regard to God. Furthermore, on account of God’s unity of essence, they assumed that God’s knowledge is one and immutable. Now, knowledge of particulars involves knowledge of changes in the particulars, and if one knows changes one’s knowledge changes, for knowledge follows its objects. Or to put it in other words, that which is eternal, namely God, cannot be subject to change. Moreover, the multiplicity of the objects of knowledge causes the multiplicity of knowledge, and this is impossible where God is concerned. These considerations led the philosophers to the denial of God’s

7 Al-Ȭmīdī, p. 76.
8 Bello, p. 111.
9 Metaphysics, XI, 9, 1074a.
11 Leaman, pp. 108f., 112f.
12 Marmura, p. 301.
13 Al-Shahrastānī, p. 222. The most famous example of the change in knowledge is the eclipse of the sun. “We shall explain this through an example, namely that the sun, for example, suffers an eclipse, after not having been eclipsed, and afterwards recovers its light. There are therefore in an eclipse three moments: the moment when there was not yet an eclipse but the eclipse was expected in the future, the time when the eclipse was actually there—its being—and thirdly, the moment the eclipse had ceased but had been. Now we have in regard to these three conditions a threefold knowledge: we know first that there is not yet an eclipse, but that there will be one; secondly that it is now there; and thirdly, that it has been present but is no longer present. This threefold knowledge is numerically distinguishable and differentiated, and its sequence implies a change in the knowing essence, for if this knowing essence thought after the cessation of the eclipse that the eclipse was present as before, this would be ignorance, not knowledge, and if it thought during its presence that it was absent, this again would be ignorance, and the one knowledge cannot take the place of the other.” Al-Ghazālī, Tahāfut, vol. I, p. 275 (455f.)
14 The notion of God’s immutability can be traced back at least to Plato. See e.g., Republic, II, 379-382. Against those who adhere to God’s immutable knowledge, al-Ghazālī argues that whoever accepts changes in the eternal world must accept changes in the eternal God. Al-Ghazālī, Tahāfut, vol. I, p. 281 (464).
15 Marmura, p. 301.