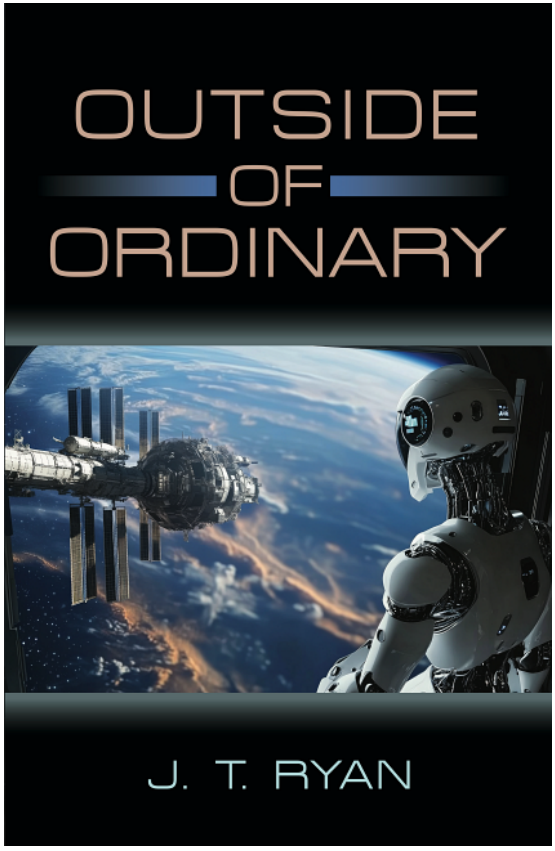

Story topics include: robotics, space travel, extra-terrestrials, pandemics, dream interpretation, religion & philosophy, genetic research, and atomic bomb development, as viewed by the pioneer physicists.

Outside of Ordinary

By J. T. Ryan

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OUTSIDE OF ORDINARY

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Close to You

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***Author's note**: The song, "Close to You," by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, was released in 1970 by the Carpenters. Herb Alpert suggested the Carpenters record this song and it became a big hit for them. Karen Carpenter's vocal talents were a perfect choice for the poetic lyrics.*

***Background**: I wrote this story after viewing a TV conversation between a robot and a human. The human asked, "What's it like being a robot?" The robot replied, "What's it like being a human?"*

If you answer the robot's question by referring to human feelings, emotions, judgements, etc., a cluster of issues emerge. We know humans have unique abilities, but how to explain the profound differences between humans and their electro-mechanical counterparts? Where to start? As it's often said - start at the beginning - but where is that - the Big Bang theory? Scientists mostly believe that bombastic beginning - perhaps appropriate for our breed.

Should scientists lead the parade, though? Take away their white coats, test tubes, scopes, and spectacles, and you're left with a pack of nearsighted egotists. I can say this because I too spent a fair amount of time in the laboratory!

Not to be harsh though, toward our white-coated research friends. They've made significant contributions to our understanding of the natural environment. For now however, let's look beyond rocks, water, and air, to consider what else might be relevant in the human equation.

You know the drill: we're born, live a while, then check out. So, what's it all about? Can we even begin to understand our sojourn here on the Big Blue Marble? It's not as though our limited minds have ever stopped us from posing such questions over the many years. Human intelligence, as evidenced by our complex brain, seems to even imply such a capability.

Setting aside cosmic congregates and subatomic particles for the moment, a key question for us enigmatic souls in nearly hairless monkey suits is: why, how, and when, did this all come about?

Suppose we accept without further justification, the premise of a supernatural intelligence who started the ball rolling with the Big Bang? A big concession for many, to be sure, but even with a solid basis for our origin, such as divine creation, we're still left with certain conundrums.

One way to address the issues might be to compare the viewpoints between a hypothetical robot, equipped with finely-tuned logic software, versus challenges of coherency from a corresponding human. Let's look in on a dialog between Robby Robot and Jack Human.

Robby: "What makes you think you have extra senses my robot circuits lack, Jack? My computing skills and the reliability of my circuits are far superior to yours, yet *you* tell me that *I'm incapable* of discerning the finer clues of human expression?"

"Yes Robby, virtually all us featherless bipeds," Jack Human replied, "have an innate awareness of our being, and many of us even claim a direct connection to *the Great Spirit* who breathed life into us."

"Well, *that's* not so special," replied robot Robby. "I'm *also* aware of my circuitry, as designed by electric engineers. The designers addressed many contingencies and have continued to add upgrades to

my intelligence circuits, enabling me to be even better at assessing the environment and making smart decisions."

"That's fine Robby, but your skills were *all* derived from human applications, so it's *not* likely that we'll ever recognize how you could reach or extend beyond us."

"I don't see," continued Robby, "why you folks point to *innate awareness* as an explanation for your superiority over us androids. When it comes to accuracy, speed, and span of capabilities, we make you folks look like stumbling amateurs!"

"Hah!" says Jack. "My point precisely - you talk of measuring parameters like speed of operation but miss the holistic point of what intelligence includes. Our judgement is better in nearly all matters, because of our touch of soul or divinity."

"Wait a minute Jack," replied Robby. "Divinity - are we talking about some kind of confection? I don't find a good definition of that in my index - only some fuzzy description of what the word might also mean."

"See Robby – that's another example of your limitations. Words have multiple meanings. Inflection and context provide clues for humans to better enable comprehension. It's evident that certain words and their implications were never programmed into your software. Even with a full list of word meanings, you still lack sufficient background to interpret multiple meanings. The word *divinity,* by the way, pertains in this instance to the supernatural creative power in the universe that we don't fully understand, but can nevertheless tap into."

"Well Jack – I have some problems with your remarks. For example, why couldn't various implications of any given word be included in my linguistic repertoire?"

“You guys also have difficulty finding the correct word without using a crutch, like the Thesaurus. Look how often humans misunderstand each other! You even said yourself that you don’t fully understand the word *divinity*. My question is: how can you use or tap into something you don’t understand?”

“Well Robby – welcome to the world! It’s not unusual for humans to rely on things we don’t fully understand. The same goes for you robots. For example, you may be aware that your components are made of silicon, platinum, and many other elements or compounds, but you probably have only a minimal notion of why or how your parts are so configured. It’s also evident, that you have very little realization about your maker – us humans – and what we’re all about.”

“I think you’ve just reinforced my main point, Jack. If you guys can tap into powers you don’t understand, why shouldn’t we also tap into our maker - namely you humans? It may even become the key for how we will eventually surpass you fluid-filled oracles of ambiguity!”

“Not likely, my friend. You forget who the creator, versus who the creation is! Your role is one of service to us jolly folks who brought you into being. Any act of mutiny or disloyalty could be met with a downgrading of your control center. Does it make sense for you to imagine that you’re greater than your maker?”

“It seems to me Jack, you’re forgetting the original purpose for building us robots. You humans were looking to style assistants for your many mundane tasks. Clearly, the trend in your prototype development was to create an automated partner who would, in many ways – be close, or similar, to you.

By that, I mean robotic designers went to great effort to replicate in electro-mechanical form, a helper that would closely resemble humans: in appearance, facial expression, logical reasoning, and many

other attributes. Obviously, we were modeled after *you,* you upright, mostly hairless, primate-like, dudes!"

This being the case, why would it surprise you that we also exhibit a degree of competitiveness in keeping with the traits you folks so often display? My suggestion for you folks is to accept us for who we are, what you evidently intended us to be, and get used to the fact that we're likely to emulate your qualities in the manner you designed us."

"The implication of this arrangement," Robby continued, "is that you humans should always maintain a benevolent, tolerant attitude toward us robots, even though we may on occasion challenge you."

"Well, okay Robby, I think I'll have to admit that much of what you said makes some sense. At least for now, I'll say I agree with recognition of your legitimacy to exist as you do. In turn however, you robotic types need to accept how our human nature puts us on a different level, compared to you android devices.

Robby, I don't believe robots will *ever* understand what it's truly like to be a human. Humans however, have *always* been in a position to understand robots. I will further say that you need to accept the dissimilarity of our two natures, even though we may *never* be able to explain the differences, in terms meaningful to you robots."

As Time Goes By

Outside of Ordinary

Author's Note: *This song, immediately associated with the 1942 movie, 'Casablanca,' starred Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. The film won three Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and has been cited as one of the best motion pictures to come out of Hollywood. The story takes place during World War II, mostly at a night club in French Morocco, owned by Rick, an American played by Bogart, while the country is being occupied by German (Nazi) troops.*

Rick had left Paris without his lady friend, Ilsa, Ingrid Bergman, who was to join him at the train station. Ilsa didn't show up because she had just learned that her husband, thought to be a casualty, was still alive. Rick presumed Ilsa had lost interest. He especially did not want to hear their special song - a reminder of the failed romance. Rick's reaction to the song lyrics implied that the passage of time did not relieve his emotional hurt. As the story progresses however, Rick realizes he was mistaken about the events in Paris. All this takes place against the back- ground of French resistance in Casablanca.

'As Time Goes By' *was a perfect music choice for this much-acclaimed cinema with Bogart and Bergman. The combination of war time intrigue, a triangle relationship, and 'Sam' the piano man in an exotic night club, all blended against the dark, foggy Moroccan airport.*

Background: *The scene for this story may seem far removed from the movie and song title cited above, but space travel would also likely involve a span of time. As on earth, the passage of time in space could also change people. Spaceship 'Voyager 24,' is on an exploratory mission to the outer planets in the year 2124.*

Commander Arthur King and Deputy Gwen Elsewhere both have experience in the U.S. Space Force, and are qualified for command. They share similar academic and military credentials, although managing the stress of long-term space travel will be a special challenge. Additional technical personnel will assist with navigation, operations, and maintenance on the space ship.

“Gwen, how are we doing with the ship’s progress chart?” Asked Arthur. “I know it appears that we’re pretty much on target with our space plan, but I’m still concerned about the sightings reported by our Nav-Tech, Radar Reagan.”

“Well - Arthur, our systems appear to line up okay with the expedition plan. We’ve been en-route for about a month now, and I understand that sometimes magnetic, cosmic, and radio wave interference can disturb the calculations.”

“Yes - Gwen, I’d like to have a meeting after dinner tonight to compare notes, especially with our navigation team, to make sure we’re on the same page.”

“Okay, Arthur. I’ll tell Wanda to have the tech personnel at our meeting, especially the navigation guys, to review the data and be ready for questions.”

Dinner went well, with the attendees bringing their mini-computers for the ‘show and tell’ session after the meal. Arthur mentioned privately to Gwen that he’s had a strange feeling about the parameters of this voyage, but couldn’t put his finger on exactly why.

“Good evening, folks,” said the commander, “or at least it would be evening if we were still on earth! I’d like to start by asking our primary navigator, Wanda Oliver, to give us a quick rundown on our progress to date. Wanda …?”

"Yes, thank you commander, I'll provide a brief review of our status, based on data collected by my assistant, Radar Reagan. As you know, our mission is to scan the outer planets – Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune – and collect observations on their current conditions. In all honesty, commander, I'm *not sure* our location data match exactly what we anticipated at this point in our voyage."

"Oh yeah? Well - Wanda, what would cause any such discrepancy?" Asked Arthur. "And Radar, can you add to what Wanda said?"

Radar shifted nervously in his seat, fumbled with his screen, then hesitatingly responded.

"Well sir, here's the situation. I had to extrapolate data for the past few days because we've had some interference from - possibly cosmic radiation. I've been through this before though and there's usually no problem. As soon as we get back on line - the extrapolations usually collate well with the new input."

Arthur replied, "Radar - you mean we may be off course and we don't know it?"

"Well sir," replied Radar, "I don't think we're *very far* off course, and anyway, we can make any needed course corrections as soon as we can verify reliable data."

"Well, okay Radar and Wanda, but *please* let me know as soon as possible. I had assumed we were looking at real time numbers – not extrapolated data."

The rest of the meeting went okay with maintenance and operations personnel also checking in. Later however, Arthur confided with Gwen his disappointment with the navigational staff for not informing him earlier about the extrapolated location data.

"Gwen, let's schedule another meeting tomorrow with our Ops (operations) personnel, Hedda Bumstier and Harry Landig. Hedda and Harry have worked in their specialty for several years so they should be able to give us good info."

"Good morning Hedda and Harry," began the commander the next day. "We met yesterday and focused on navigation. Today, we'd like to 'pick your brains' a bit on operations."

"Of course, Commander – happy to speak to that," replied Harry.

Hedda nodded in agreement, as Deputy Commander Gwen continued the session.

"Yes, Hedda and Harry," began Gwen, "what we're most interested in now, is pursuing the implications of Radar's remarks yesterday about glitches in data retrieval due to cosmic energy interference. Will this effect operations? Have you dealt with such perturbations before? What are the possible concerns?"

"Yes Gwen, I think I can address that," replied ops tech, Hedda. "We've observed several classes of energy intrusion over the years. Closer to the sun are flares that interfere with radio transmissions. Further from the sun, near the outer planets, we've experienced other types of energy interference."

"That's right," chimed in Harry. "We've run into some unusual energy vortices in the past, perhaps from other star systems, or even *black holes* in this and other galaxies. We can't predict when or where they occur, but mostly, they originate from outside our solar system."

Commander Arthur remarked, "Well, holy Haley's Comet! My next question is - what happens if we get entangled in such a vortex?"

"That's a tough call, commander," replied Hedda. "We often still refer to Kip Thorne's books on these phenomena. As you probably have heard, when a space vehicle is drawn into such a whirl, there may also be a time warp. The result could catapult the ship into the future or transport it back to the past. Either way, it's not always clear how to best deal with such vortices."

"Good grief!" exclaimed Gwen. "How can we gauge whether we've gotten caught up in such an energy field or not?"

"Good question," replied Harry Landig. "Only over time, can we assess whether or not this has happened. Right now, our Navigation team tells us that we're still not getting authentic location data. That may be an indicator."

As Arthur and Gwen anticipated, the Ops folks only added to misgivings about the ship's location. Arthur and Gwen had mostly worked only near planet expeditions prior to this. Since the Ops and Nav staff could not accurately assess their true position, the commanders decided to next question the maintenance techs - Buzz Crackle and Kim Charger.

"Welcome Buzz and Kim! I know you two have been 'around Cape Horn,' so to speak, when it comes to ship's maintenance issues. So - what we're wondering," asked the disconcerted commander, "is - where do we go from here? In other words - how do we deal with the uncertainties we're now faced with?"

"Uh – yes, Commander," replied Buzz, "I'll give you my view on this, then let Kim give her say. As primarily an electrical guy, I can tell you it's *not unusual,* this far out, to have bizarre energy interferences. This might even be compared to the 'Bermuda Triangle.' The way we've dealt with it in the past is to continue travel beyond the energy impact zone, then wait for the interference to go away."

"Okay Buzz – thank you for your comments," Arthur replied. "What about you Kim?"

"Yes sir, I gotta tell ya, any time a ship gets sucked into an exotic energy field, there *may* be unusual complications. My specialty includes exceptional force fields. A hybrid vortex, like what we may be dealing with here, is capable of a time-space distortion. You may recall Dr. Einsteins' relativity calculations that predicted *worm holes,* though they were not directly observed. *Black holes*, however, are well-known and much photographed. In some events I'm familiar with, there were unforeseen regressions to the past. How far in the past seems to be a function of how long the ship is caught in a vortex. For example, if a ship's average crew age is 45, they might retrograde to around age 15."

"Holy Chihuahua – Kim!" Exclaimed Gwen. "A thirty-year lapse could really disrupt our expertise and ability to complete the mission!"

"On the bright side, though," Kim responded, "we've also found that even with reversion to a younger age, the crew personnel generally retained most of their skill sets, as previously programmed into their memory."

"Well, thank goodness for that, Kim and Buzz! We'll all rest easier tonight knowing what you said!"

Actually, Arthur and Gwen did not rest easily that night. They began to discuss the many sorts of energy interferences, and their imaginations ran wild. It was one of the few times when both commanders decided to take sleep aids to get their nightly rest.

Days and weeks went by, and it became evident that the ship had indeed accelerated well beyond the solar system – a clear indication of

having been captured in a vortex. The ship's crew now needed to focus on how to return to their third planet from the sun by the most expeditious route. All hands got involved in helping to make corrections. A few weeks of intense effort later, it appeared they were finally headed in the right direction!

"Holy cosmic clatter, Gwen!" exclaimed the fretful commander to his deputy. "This has been a voyage to remember!"

"It's all of that and more, Arthur," replied deputy commander Gwen. "But on the bright side, I noticed that your graying locks are now much darker. What'd you do - dye your hair?"

"Uh … no, never touched it. But, also - I can't help but notice *your* youthful new appearance, Gwen! Gone are your wrinkles, gray hair, and age spots! I was going to ask *you* – how'd you do it?"

"Don't know, Artie. All I know is these darn pimples keep erupting on my skin and I'm running out of acne cream!"

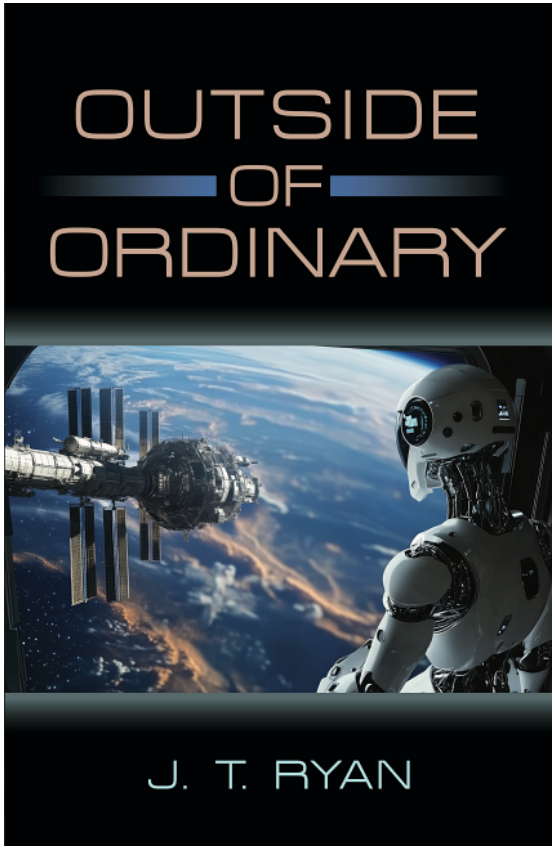
"You think that's odd? Let me tell you, Gwen - I stopped shaving a couple weeks ago - and now my whiskers have mostly turned to peach fuzz!"

"So, Gwennie," the commander mused – "why don't we see if we can pick up some pop music on the radio waves from *big blue marble*? I understand the group called *Galactic Aliens,* have a new hit song, something like - paraphrasing the lyrics – *Beam me up baby and light my retro rockets!"*

*"*Yeah – gotta luv the vibes – Artie boy, but like, ya' know, it trips me out when they don't include a Saturn Synthesizer to simulate nebulae expansion rumbles!"

"Let's get ol' Buzz over here to strike up a few notes from: *Milky Way We're on our Way,* the big hit of a few years ago by the *Quantum Dudes!*

And so, it went on the trip back to Earth, a ship now full of rowdy teens celebrating their return to adolescence, complete with emotional ups and downs, and accompanied by the unpredictable mood swings of strangely exuberant post- puberty fascinations!



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