

Women at Warp Episode 164: Ethics of the Prime Directive

[Women At Warp theme]

Sue: Hi, and welcome to Women at Warp: A Roddenberry *Star Trek* Podcast. Join us on our continuing mission to explore intersectional diversity in infinite combinations. My name is Sue, and thanks for tuning in. With me today is my crew member, Jarrah.

Jarrah: I mean, I tried not to interfere in this episode, but it was really hard because I really cared.

Sue: Your compassion just overcame you.

Jarrah: Yeah. [laughter] Sorry. Sorry, Starfleet.

Sue: And we have a very special guest today, Dr. Janet Stemwedel, who is a philosophy professor for today's episode. Janet, would you mind introducing yourself to our listeners, giving us a little bit of your history and your history with *Star Trek*?

Janet: Sure. Thank you for having me. My name is Janet Stemwedel. I am a Professor of Philosophy at San Jose State University, where my official focus is on philosophy of science and ethics in science. But that doesn't mean I can stop myself from thinking about how *Star Trek* might be a good test bed for some of the philosophical ideas I'm working out. I was raised on *The Original Series* of *Star Trek*, which must already have been in reruns by the time I was being raised on it because it was the early 70s. So, that's really the chunk of *Star Trek* that feels most like home to me. But I recognize a pluralism of different ways to engage in *Star Trek*, and I think that's part of what makes our universe livable. [laughs]

Sue: Oh, I love it. Well, if you hadn't figured out yet, today, our main topic is going to be the ethics of the Prime Directive. So, I'm excited for this conversation. But before we get there, we have a little bit of housekeeping to do first as usual.

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This episode is brought to you by TextExpander, and we'll hear a little bit more from them later. So, let's get into it, the Prime Directive.

[laughter]

Jarrah: This is the first time I really realized I had significant issues with it. I think in the past, I mostly, especially as a kid, just accepted, like, "Yes, this is enlightened."

Janet: Well, I mean, so and maybe this is showing my age. By the time I was really reflective about the Prime Directive was also when people were starting to approach *Star Trek* reruns with drinking game rules. And the Prime Directive was sort of your guarantee that you were

going to get to drink some beer, because violation of the Prime Directive was a guaranteed chug.

Sue: It's so funny, when I was going through so many of these examples, looking through many of the episodes, often, not always, let's say, the trends were that *The Original Series* brought it up in order to violate it. *TNG* found themselves interfering with less developed civilizations, *DS9* found themselves interfering with internal politics, and *Voyager* found themselves on the other side of the Prime Directive on more than one occasion. So, it's kind of interesting how each show, although they didn't just stick to that setup, did it a little bit differently.

Jarrah: And it says something, and I'm sure we can get into more examples and stuff, but it does say something that basically every instance when it's brought up, with the exception of a few times when it's just cited as our enlightened background or principle, it is brought up for the crew to have a debate over it and for the audience to have to feel torn between two different positions. So, even though it is the underpinning of everything the Federation does post its introduction, apparently, it is never assumed, really, that it's always right.

Janet: Well, maybe there's something useful about that though. Maybe there's something useful about a directive, first of all, that is hard to fulfill, I want to say when the rubber hits the road, but when you're piloting a starship, there's very little rubber hitting road. [laughter] But also, it's something that requires reflection, that it's not super obvious when you get into practical applications, maybe there's something useful about, "Here's a thing that is central to our organization, but we always have to really feel our way through it anyway." And I don't know if that's capturing something about what it's like to be a sentient being aware of your place in a universe that contains other sentient beings or whether I'm making a more universal thing of it than it is.

At the very least, it seems to capture something about the challenge of figuring out how to be in a universe with other beings that are recognizably like us in certain particular ways. Like, that's never going to be a totally easy thing if we're not totally on autopilot and not thinking about what we're doing. So, maybe the real problem is we're thinking about what we're doing. It's that whole self-reflective thing that some philosophy professor probably put into their heads at Starfleet Academy. [laughs]

Sue: Well, let's back up a tiny bit and do some definitions and some origin. I'm sure everybody listening knows what the Prime Directive is, but none of us really know because it's never quoted on screen. Prime Directive General Order 1, it's a policy of noninterference. For pre-warp societies, this means no identification of self or mission, no interference with the social development of said planet, no references to space or the fact that there are other worlds or more advanced civilizations. And that's a direct quote from *Bread and Circuses*. That is as close as we get to an onscreen definition. For warp-capable non-Federation societies. It means not getting involved in their internal affairs. So, it plays on two levels here.

Jarrah: Yeah, I think a lot of folks I encounter have confusion on whether it just applies to pre warp or not. We clearly see instances when it doesn't, but sometimes when they talk about it sounds like it only does.

Janet: The context, I think, is interesting for us to reflect on. So, *Bread and Circuses* was originally aired in 1968 and what's happening then, well, the United States is heavily involved in the Vietnam War. And so, you've got this moment when television viewers might be saying, "Huh, this thing about assuming that any place we go with superior force to try and accomplish a goal, that should be just fine. Nothing bad's going to happen as long as we win." Television viewers maybe were saying, "That's not an assumption I feel so comfortable

making right now.” So, maybe starting to get serious about thinking about not being colonial at every turn was a thing that was happening when the audience heard explicitly what the Prime Directive was about.

And I think getting serious about the kinds of harms that colonialism can do is probably a healthy impulse, especially for *Star Trek* fans from countries like the United States that arguably have a pretty serious colonial past, we'd like to think. Maybe it's not as past as we'd like it to be. But I'm not sure that even perfectly following the Prime Directive necessarily lands us in a place that we want to endorse either.

Sue: Mm-hmm.

Jarrah: Yeah, that's a really good point. And we're going to do a follow up episode specifically on like colonialism in *Star Trek*. Although I'm sure we are going to touch on it because you can't really talk about the Prime Directive without talking about colonialism. But I do think that, in addition to the Vietnam War, there's an understanding in *Star Trek* that the colonization settlement of the new world by European people did not work out super well. But I think that-- unfortunately, I think that there are a couple things that are wrong about this approach to it.

First of all, it kind of implies that the problem was that we were just too generous with sharing our technology and we went all into this with the right spirit and if we just hadn't shared our technology, then things would have been fine and people would have been left to their “natural development.” So, lots of problems with that in terms of drawing-- trying to create a doctrine out of a historical thing that you actually have to acknowledge what actually happened in the historical scenario.

And then, the other problem is, for me, at least the idea of pre-warp being the line where you draw this, that in *Star Trek* we see repeated pointing to when “primitive societies” move from superstition to enlightenment, meaning basically religion to science. And we've talked in our episodes on religion about how that's not necessarily an objective standard we can apply. But yeah, it implies that there is a linear type of development of a society and that left alone for long enough everyone's going to hit that warp-capable travel as a marker that you can say, “We're equal at this point.”

So, yeah, I don't think it always works out super well on screen. So, that's where it's like came from a good place. How does it actually manifest in the universe is a bit of a challenge. But also, what are the underlying messages sending and are those maybe overly generous to the history of colonialism?

Janet: Sure. And there's a way too that maybe I want to even say a little bit more about the good place that I think the Prime Directive is trying to come from. Ethically, it seems to me that it combines two impulses that are pretty strong in us, two moral intuitions that a lot of people have. One is that you have a certain kind of moral responsibility for the bad consequences you cause even if those are not bad consequences that you intended. So, accidentally setting a chain of causal stuff into motion that leads someplace bad, even if you couldn't have seen it coming, or you didn't see it coming, or you didn't mean for it to come down in a bad way, if you started those dominoes toppling, there's a way in which ethically we want to say, that's on you. And so, part of the Prime Directive, I think, is capturing some of that. We don't want to be responsible for doing a lot of bad stuff to people that could have been avoided.

I think the second strong moral intuition that's woven into it is the idea of something like autonomy, something like choosing our own goals, choosing our own course, and respecting other cultures enough to say, we shouldn't just blunder in and take that choice from them.

We shouldn't come in and say, "Here's how you should do it, or here's the technologies that would best to do it that we have." In a certain way, we should let cultures that are not our own develop the way they want to develop. We should let people living in those worlds make the worlds that they imagine that they want, not the worlds that we see as possible for them.

And that sort of, combined with this idea that the consequences of the causal change you set in motion have moral import, says if there's going to be unintended consequences, wouldn't it be better if the culture that we're looking at interfering with or not interfering with, isn't it better if those people choose their own course and then if it turns out badly, they'll sort it out? We all sort of sort it out when our own culture goes on a path that produces some unintended bad consequences. Wouldn't that be better than having some smartass Starfleet captain do this to you?

Jarrah: Oh, for sure. Yeah.

Janet: And then, the question, of course, is, "Wait, is this better for them or is this better for Starfleet PR?" And that's a separate kind of question. But there's all kinds of ways we could cash out better here.

Sue: Yeah. In going through a lot of this stuff, I tried to make lists of the arguments that came up often for and against the Prime Directive, and certainly the "Is it arrogant to interfere? Are we playing God? Are we affecting them in a way that we shouldn't?" came up often. Another one that sort of surprised me but comes up a lot in the debates that the crews have, is letting nature take its course.

Janet: Yeah, that's a real tough one, especially right now. In Earth, human milieus, let's say, late 2019 to mid-2021. What does nature taking its course look like? How many of us are dead if we had let nature take its course with the coronavirus? I think internally we're not always down with saying nature taking its course is better than creatures living in a world, intervening on that world in ways that change it. And also, there's something, I think, that strikes me as really peculiar once we start describing the world others live in as nature rather than culture or rather than civilization.

Sue: One of the arguments I saw against that argument, very convoluted, was that if we're accepting that there is some sort of plan or fate, aren't we also accepting that there is some God rather, that wants things to be a certain way? By agreeing, if we are, that nature is right, what is nature? Is it some supreme being? Is it the fate of the universe? And if that exists, aren't we saying that the people on this planet or the people of this culture or even the people on our starship don't have any freewill because nature is right? Did I even make sense just then? [laughs]

Janet: I think you did, but I think there's maybe an escape in there. I mean, if there's sort of nature taking its course in a way that is so strong that we might describe it as fate, then in a certain way, that feels like it gets us off the hook from trying to intervene. Because if fate is that strong, then no matter what we do, what's supposed to happen is going to happen. And potentially, some of the stuff that we're doing, some of the interventions that we're trying are part of nature's plan to bring about the effect that's supposed to happen.

Sue: Right. You get into a paradox.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Janet: Yeah, paradox or at least a dispute about where to draw the lines around the part of the universe that is nature taking its course. Are we part of that or are we somehow apart from that?

Jarrah: Like, I don't think the *Star Trek* creators would have seen that argument or the writers would see that as supporting the existence of a God. It's the same way that evolution is a process. It's not a religious process or a spiritual process. But then, you look at *Dear Doctor* and it's like we got to let the process take its course. And that's a whole separate thing that's not actually how evolution works, how you see it in that episode. But I feel like in *Star Trek*, when they do that appeal to let nature take its course, it's often in ways where we can very clearly see that it's going to end up with destruction. Like, in the *Voyager* episode time and again, where Janeway is like, "Well, we don't know what's going to happen." And Paris goes like, "Surely, it's better than a world destroying explosion." [laughs]

Sue: Oh, yeah, the ignorance about the future argument.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: Right. How do you know if you stop something bad, something worse isn't going to happen.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: Which basically is paralysis out of fear or uncertainty.

Janet: Mm-hmm.

Jarrah: And that definitely seems like an argument that plays in favor of the Starfleet crew's interest, that we're pretending we're enlightened because we're not going to go stop this plague or we're not going to stop this nuclear explosion. But really, the only one that benefits is you. That, like, in maybe 99.5% of situations, I'm sure Spock could hone it down better.

Janet: Yeah. I guess it may come down to not a question of would it be better to stop a particular thing from happening or cause a different thing to happen. I think from the point of view of identifiable beings-- we can come up with the answer to that. Like, yeah, it's worse for them if their whole world blows up. But maybe the real question is, is there a way that we have the capacity to intervene that is likely to work and that won't also bring with it some corresponding bad side effect that is of comparable evil to letting this world blow up or whatever.

Jarrah: Maybe instead of a directive with 47 suborders, they needed like a rubric of questions.

[laughter]

Janet: Like a flowchart, right? In case of emergency, break glass, pull out flowchart, and start working through the questions together.

Sue: All right, let's take a minute real quick and talk about TextExpander. Work smarter, not harder with TextExpander. TextExpander helps you work faster and smarter so you can focus your time on your most important work.

Jarrah: Your Prime Directives, as it were.

Sue: Your Prime Directives. With just a few keystrokes, TextExpander keeps you consistent, accurate, and working efficiently-

Janet: -and ethically.

Sue: -to avoid violating the Prime Directive.

Jarrah: Yes.

[laughter]

Sue: Or maybe to violate the Prime Directive.

Jarrah: Depends on the situation.

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Jarrah: Yes.

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Jarrah: Yeah, if you are going to go into a first contact situation, you need to get your message right every time.

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Well, another thing that's interesting, and I think this is a very *TNG* thing, at least in the stuff I rewatched, is that it seemed to be okay if somebody asked for help. I'm thinking particularly of *Pen Pals*, which is the first example that jumps to mind where the crew decides they can interfere because this little girl that Data has been talking to is asking for help. Therefore, it's okay to break the Prime Directive.

Janet: Well, and here I think we get into some super interesting territory in terms of what kind of respect do we need to have for other cultures and how they do things. Because I think there's a lot of cases in which in an actual Earth history, imperial powers clearly have not respected cultures, have used cultures as places to pillage all sorts of raw materials and human labor and land and whatever else.

But there's other cases where people will say, "Well, you've got to respect other cultures." So, that means we cannot interfere if there's a culture that has decided that an entire gender doesn't get full human rights and we really shouldn't interfere if here's a culture that decides there's a whole religion whose members don't get accorded full humanity, and we should maybe round them up and keep them out of our workforce and things like that. Like, there may well be good reasons to think that interfering in a culture that is not humane-- well, humane might not be the right word. Pick a less human-focused word than humane. But interfering in a culture that is manifestly oppressing some of its own members by the likes of those members. Like, maybe there's something to be said for that. Maybe there's a moral obligation there. Maybe we don't have to assume that every culture is A-okay and doesn't need any pushback on any of the stuff it's doing.

Jarrah: Yeah. Like, I actually like the idea that you can get around it in certain circumstances by being asked for help. Because I think that part of the intent of the Prime Directive that we discussed is to avoid unintentionally messing things up, but also like unintentionally

exploiting people or using people for your own ends and not thinking about where they're coming from. And by respecting their request to intervene, it can be a show of respect for their agency and respect for the value of their own knowledge.

And I think that in some instances, we see Starfleet maybe misses out on listening and valuing other forms of knowledge in particularly pre-warp societies, because they are so focused on the Prime Directive, but also the idea of this linear progress that they maybe miss out on what they could learn from other people other than as kind of like anthropological, archaeological curiosity.

Janet: Right. For a long time, I sort of thought about the Prime Directive-- Well, okay. And I should back up a little and say, before I was trained as a philosopher of science, I was trained as a physical chemist. So, one of the places that I started seeing resonances with the Prime Directive, back in my early twenties, was quantum mechanics and this whole idea that there are systems that by the very act of observing them, you are changing, you are putting into a different kind of state. So, I was like, "Huh, okay." So, Prime Directive is kind of maybe an effort not to do that or to be aware of the impact you could have with that. Cool.

But later, when I was training to be a philosopher of science, I took some anthropology of science courses where we read anthropologists writing about how scientists study primates and how they study primates in the field. And there was a particular piece of comparative anthropological work looking at primatologists from countries like the United States and primatologists from Japan and how they had very different attitudes in the field about how big a deal it was if the groups of monkeys you were trying to study were aware that there were humans out in the woods with them, observing them.

And the primatologists from the United States were like, "That is the absolute the thing you want never to happen. You want these monkeys never to realize that there's humans out there in the world trying to look at them and see what they're doing. Because really, what we're trying to get is we're trying to build knowledge about what these monkeys would be like in a perfect state of nature." And of course, a perfect state of nature in the minds of these American primatologists is nature that does not include human beings.

Whereas the Japanese primatologists were like, "Look, the monkeys we're studying live on islands where there are also humans. These monkeys know that humans exist. Pretending that we don't exist is not necessary to figure out what's going on with monkey behavior, with social structure of monkey groups. So, if they catch a glimpse of us, we're not destroying their whole world. And by the way, the nature that these monkeys are part of that we're trying to study also includes humans."

So, I shifted at that point to seeing the Prime Directive maybe in these more anthropological terms, and started asking myself the question, so what does this mean really about Starfleet and its attitude towards pre-warp civilizations? Are we actually using the word "civilization" there in scare quotes? Are we really acting more like we're studying some creature in a state of nature that doesn't include us? And why is the focus on studying them rather than sharing a universe with them? Rather than being members sort of the same larger galactic community where there might be something to be gained by interacting with each other rather than just peeking from a distance?

Sue: It reminds me very much of *The Next Gen* episode, *Who Watches the Watchers*, which is very similar to what you described. This is the one with Federation scientists essentially set up in a duck blind that's hidden by holographic projectors watching this pre-warp proto-Vulcan society and they get discovered. And the society starts to think of the Enterprise crew, and Picard specifically, as gods because of the amazing things they can do.

Janet: And yeah, there's a way in which for sure, that can be at least an imagined harm, an imagined danger. Like, all of a sudden, you're locked into looking at our technologies and the things we can do with them, rather than sort of imagining what kinds of technologies you want and need collectively. Like, maybe this is cool and new and flashy and there's uses to which you could put it. But that doesn't mean that it's necessarily the only thing or even the best thing to pursue the goals you already had.

But at the same time, there's a piece of it that's like, look, if suddenly, creatures from another planet with a starship show up and they've got a good way to treat a disease, that routine kills a lot of your young, then having [laughs] those people on the starship hide that technology from you might not be the coolest thing from your point of view.

Jarrah: Yeah. And I do think we should talk a little bit more about the different types of interfering in a medical situation versus what we see in *The Original Series* with more of those the planetary Vietnam proxy wars. But the piece about anthropology and observance really hit me in *The Next Generation* episode, *First Contact*, where Riker is captured after he's part of a surveillance team that has been surveilling this planet for years. And when they show up-- It's a really interesting episode and I think there's a lot to unpack. But I really, for the first time, kind of realized how Picard really treats this nonchalantly, where he says, "Basically, we've been observing your people for years, but we don't trust that they're going to take it well. So, don't tell your Chancellor."

And then, of course, people don't take it well. Like, I don't think most people would take it well that you've had a bunch of aliens pretending to be humans living next door, and people assume if you're not sharing it, that you're maybe hiding something. And then, ultimately, it's well, your people-- it was supposed to be sort of related to *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, this idea that the people have to overcome their suspicion and their fear.

But I was just really struck by, I think, the dialogue is written really well because the points that the Chancellor is making, who's very reasonable, is like, "Yeah, this doesn't look good, Picard." And the idea that you surveil people in disguise for years before and that is a value-neutral exercise that, the other people don't have the right to be offended by. I questioned that a little bit, but I thought it was really a well-done dynamic.

Janet: Yeah. And so, to go back to the thing I said earlier about there's a way in which the Prime Directive latches on to this moral intuition we have that respecting people's autonomy is a good idea, that letting people set their own aims and pursue their own goals is what we should try to do, well, part of autonomy isn't just getting out of the way for people to set their own goals and pursue them. Part of autonomy is not misleading people, not lying to people. So, it's kind of a big violation of autonomy to embed yourself in someone else's civilization, to be spying on someone else and to withhold that information or to withhold information once you're caught about why you've been doing it and what you're putting that information towards.

So, yeah, if we're serious about respecting other people's autonomy, it has to become a little bit less paternalistic, perhaps. Although I guess then we get into, the philosophers who study Kant who's sort of the granddaddy of, "Respect people's autonomy, damn it. That's what ethics is all about." We'll sort of note that Kant didn't extend the presumption of full autonomy to every human. Certainly, children, he treated as not in possession of full autonomy. And so, you wouldn't want to treat them--

Like, they were treating children paternalistically from a certain point of view makes sense, but I'm not sure that it's great practice and certainly not going to lead to great PR if you're an entity like Star Fleets going out and saying, "Ah, towards some of your civilizations are being paternalistic is what we're going to do." Like, even if they're going to do that, probably

they don't want to say that. And as an ethicist, I'm going to say, and if you're saying it, you should probably do what you're saying rather than say one thing and do something else.

Jarrah: Yeah, I think there's maybe some discussion to be had at the Federation table about, out of these very good intentions to recognize when you hold the power in a situation and to not unintentionally wield too much influence or potentially coerce or manipulate people for your own ends, out of that, also maybe there should still be some recognition that power isn't static and that there are things that you can do to level the playing field and maybe there are occasions where that can be done in consultation with other people. Although I am aware that could also open up a whole bunch of other cans of worms. So, it's complicated. [chuckles]

Janet: Yeah. But then again, sharing a world is complicated too. So, *Star Trek* sort of takes the project that I hope we're mostly familiar with here on Earth of trying to share this world and just amplifies it, makes it bigger, makes it broader. But it's already-- If you're not the person on your planet with the most and best resources for self-defense, you're already engaged in a negotiation about how to share a world with others. You're already in a place where you can't just arbitrarily decide, "This is how it's going to be," because the other people sharing your world will have the opportunity to let you know if that's not okay with them, or to withhold their cooperation on certain projects where you might need it, or to try and kill you in your sleep if you're not being [laughs] a fun person to share the world with.

So, there's a way in which *Star Trek* is taking that same everyday kind of challenge and just showing us more versions of it and maybe helping us think of it at a remove that I'd like to believe when we come back to our everyday life, helps us a little better to think about whether unbridled power is what we really want or whether finding ways to see each other and hear each other and negotiate the sharing of the world with each other might be better.

Sue: Interesting. I think that leads us pretty well into one of the areas of examples that we have for this, and that is the Hippocratic Oath versus the Prime Directive. And there are two episodes that come to mind for me on this topic. One is *TNG's Symbiosis*, and the other is *Enterprise's Dear Doctor*. And in both situations, you've got two groups of people, two societies or two races that are in different power dynamics, and one is essentially taking advantage of the other. In *The Next Gen* episode, one of the races is keeping the other addicted to narcotics. In the *Enterprise* episode, one of the races is suffering plague, but it turns out that they have been oppressing the other, and they're actually the Menk. And the Menk are actually a lot more capable, if we can call it that, than the *Enterprise* crew is led to believe initially.

And it's interesting because in *Next Gen*, of course, you've got The Doctor advocating for compassion. "Let me help these people who have this addiction who are being exploited." And the captain saying, "No, you can't do that. We can't violate the Prime Directive." And in the *Enterprise* episode, you have The Doctor saying, "I'm not going to interfere with nature that's essentially killing off this one race to let the other race thrive." And you've got the captain saying, but we can cure them. Why don't we cure them? So, the roles are a little bit flipped in a somewhat similar setup in these two episodes.

Janet: Right. And the Hippocratic Oath mostly is focused on first, do no harm. And part of that is early recognition that there's lots of ways a physician could try to intervene, but you don't always have good reason to believe your intervention will succeed. So, in a certain kind of way, the Hippocratic Oath is maybe good ancestral policy for the Prime Directive, which seems to be recognizing maybe the same kind of thing, is there's lots of ways you could get involved that are going to make more of a mess than you want to leave. A couple of-- just because if you get immersed in history of medicine stuff, it's hard to shake it.

One thing worth noting about the Hippocratic Oath is early Greek physicians were pretty serious as a group about if you don't have good reason to believe the intervention you're doing is likely to leave things better off than they were when you got there, put down the damn scalpel. You're not allowed to do it. Which in some ways actually comes across much more as Prime Directive-y than a lot of our TV doctor shows would lead us to expect from the Hippocratic Oath.

The other thing I think that's worth noting, I'm just going to throw it out there, is the Hippocratic Oath, in a lot of ways, existed as an early set of professional standards that early physicians were getting serious about to help them develop a clientele that trusted them so they could make a living by being doctors. Like, as a professional group, they wanted the public to respect them. And they said how we do that is we all have to agree to behave in these good ways. So, there's a way in which you could see if the Hippocratic Oath is sort of ancestor to the Prime Directive.

Like, maybe that's part of the motivation of Starfleet too, is, look, given our impulse to get involved versus to stay out of things and either way, it's foreseeable that we could make a hash out of things, because that's just how causal chains in this universe go sometimes, which of these is going to have more angry communications coming into Starfleet switchboard? And maybe we need to sort of get behind the one that minimizes bad PR for us.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, basically, politics. [laughs]

Janet: It's hard to avoid, when you've got people like creatures at the helm. Yeah.

Jarrah: I need to address *Symbiosis* briefly because it does not age well. And I think what really confused me is, they encounter the group that-- the people that are addicted to narcotics, and they basically offer, "We can fix your shit, but we can't fix your health issue." And that is like-- I don't understand how that you get that. So, maybe I missed something. But then at the end of the day, Crusher, in my opinion has it right. I don't think that's going to be a hard sell for Sue, [Sue laughs] but she says, "I can synthesize a nonaddictive substitute." I get that you could wonder, well, given the fact that you have two planets whose entire economy revolves around this narcotic, what's the effect going to be?

But at the end of the day, Picard goes with a path that guarantees that the drug situation is still going to dissolve. And Crusher is saying, basically, "You're condemning like thousands of people to suffering." And he goes, "Well, maybe in the short term, but at the end of the day they're going to basically figure out how to move on with their lives and do better things with it," kind of. And so, he basically is acknowledging we are interfering, but in the least humane way possible.

Janet: And yeah, you'd want to ask, so why, tell us more, tell us more about why this path forward seems like the best way to share this galaxy with these people?

Jarrah: Yeah.

Janet: Is there sort of a hidden hunch about the right way to overcome addiction? Is it not meaningful somehow if it's a medical intervention. Does it have to come from inside and be a moral, individual choice to-- What the hell is that, Picard? [laughter] Have you read any of the literature on addiction? Because maybe you would change your mind about-- yeah.

Jarrah: Yeah, and that was also politics as well, that we know that was the high point of the world on drugs and that conversation was had in the writers room about how to approach

this. And that's why we got that great just say no to drugs speech that Tasha gives to Wesley. But that's another topic for another episode.

Janet: But I think in a way though, it captures maybe some of what the Prime Directive gets us without explicitly saying as what it gets us, it's possibly the case that the problem is not just that we're coming in with different technologies. We may be coming in with different moral intuitions and different hunches about, "Here's a thing that can be properly addressed or effectively addressed with technology, and here's the thing that needs to be addressed in some nontechnological way. Otherwise, it just doesn't count."

And our intuitions, first of all, might be quite different from the intuitions of the people to whom we're considering offering an intervention and they might be worse. We might be wrong. And I think recognizing that is maybe part of the point of at least having a moment of reflection about the Prime Directive, is it gives us an opportunity to recognize that not only are we ignorant about how exactly the causal chains are going to play out because it doesn't seem like we're living in that deterministic a universe, but also we might be ignorant about the places where our own knowledge and hunches are not as strong as we think they are.

Jarrah: That's a really good point.

Sue: Well, we touched a little bit on the natural disasters that the crews run into, so I don't really want to spend too much time going back there. I do just want to point out that in the *Next Gen* episode, *Homeward*, this statistic is thrown out that Starfleet has allowed 60 races to die out rather than interfere with their fate, which sounds terrible to me.

Jarrah: I will also just throw out there that Ron Moore interviewed about that episode which is the one with Worf's brother where they take the people to a holodeck to try to resettle them to be like, "We're going on a journey." And Ron Moore was basically saying that I think that the Prime Directive would need to be more flexible than it is. And for me, I'm rooting for Worf's brother the entire episode.

Sue: [laughs] But I want to talk about the episodes where we're not dealing with the pre-warp society but the internal politics of a warp-capable society. And this is a lot of *DS9*. I'm thinking about pretty much any time the crew interferes with the politics on Bajor *In The Pale Moonlight*. I mean, come on.

Jarrah: Oh, yeah.

Sue: [laughs] Getting the Romulans involved in the Dominion War, even captive pursuit. But there are other series as well. *TOS's* private little war, *TNG's* high ground, that's a purely internal conflict. And the Enterprise shows up and essentially is arming one side of that conflict and not the other. Yeah, it happens a lot and it seems to be arbitrary as to when and why.

Janet: Right. And I think there's a question about where to draw lines there too. So, it may well be the case that the people who say arming one side of a conflict that is not ours and not the other, that's probably bad, that's probably too far. But what if we were sharing op-eds [laughs] that supported one side rather than another? What if you're not putting guns in the mix but arguments instead, is that better? Is that okay? Is that somehow interference that is heading off something that ought to be happening internally and where part of the value is not just that people are swayed by an argument, but that people who have skin in the game are able to think in terms of persuading each other with arguments and are able to think in terms of coming up with the arguments that will be persuasive, is there a way that we're messing that up if we get involved? And I'll put my cards on the table. I think I'd be likely to think in a situation where an argument could save lives that it's probably worth that kind of

violation of the Prime Directive. But I'm not sure that I've got much stronger than an intuition to back that up.

Sue: I need to correct myself and say that in the high ground, they're providing medical supplies, not weapons.

Jarrah: Yeah, and part of the reason that they kind of stop and don't help them is they're like, "Oh, these people are too violent." Like, you refuse to eschew violence and just draw sexy pictures of Dr. Picard.

Sue: Dr. Picard? [laughs] I'm fine with that too. [laughter]

Jarrah: Dr. Crusher. But I mean, some of these-- I do think obviously the implications of selling arms in a conflict is massively complex and problematic. But there does seem in some of these episodes to be a value judgment around oppressed groups that are using violence to achieve their ends because *Star Trek* very much embraces principles of nonviolence. And I think there is room to have a discussion about that.

I think part of the reason you see that in *Deep Space Nine* challenged a bit more with the Maquis is that they are setting up an example sort of similar to a pre-World War II kind of appeasement situation where the Dominion is basically going to end up conquering all of Europe and we have to stop them somewhere.

Janet: Right. And I think in some ways, in a perfect world, of course, we prefer nonviolent means. And what kind of world are we in now? I think that loops back to some of the challenges of the Prime Directive as an official Starfleet order, is it's the kind of thing that you could formulate if you're thinking from first principles rather than looking around at the challenges of the actual messy universe that we live in. It would be lovely if all beings could figure out how to make nonviolence work and engage with other beings and figure out how we can all share this space.

But in the interim, if there's folks who are going to get violently oppressed, what are we going to do for them? What have we got? Can we do something for them? Is it appropriate for us to do something for them? Are you really telling us that sharing a world with oppressed people means that we have to sit on the sidelines and watch what happens to them and just root for them silently? That doesn't feel very good. That doesn't feel like solidarity or being an accomplice, which is often in Earth interactions, what we need from other people. So, why is it suddenly different once we're out in space?

Jarrah: But then if you do get involved, it goes back to that issue about agency and understanding that oppressed group and not imposing your worldview and your solutions because that can sometimes-- not taking stock of cultural values and cultural norms and practices can end up creating a situation where technically, you might be making things better in the short term and just make things terrible in the long term.

Janet: Right. I think in a lot of ways, part of what this says to me is it can't ever be the case that these interactions are one and done. I think once we get to the point of saying, "We're going to interact with you. You're not going to be unaware of us," or that there's other people out there in the universe, I think maybe that sets up a responsibility to be continually engaging and maybe that doesn't mean like full court press all the time, but it does mean, "Now, you're part of my moral community and I'm part of your moral community. And if you need stuff from us, we have to listen when you ask. And if we can't render the kinds of things you're asking from us as help or whatever, we have to tell you why and we have to have a conversation about it. And it's not like one of us is recognized as the expert and the other is not. We have to navigate this world sharing together."

Sue: Well, that brings me right to what I wanted to bring up next, which is the times the Federation finds itself on the other side. And that happens really in *Voyager* a couple of times. The episodes I'm thinking of, for anyone who cares, are *Prime Factors* and *Dragon's Teeth*. In neither episode does it play a huge part in the plot. But in both cases, *Voyager* comes across a more advanced civilization and asks for help and are denied with the reasoning that they don't want to contaminate. They don't want to give away technology that the Voyager crew isn't ready for yet. And they're admittedly shaken about it. Like, what are you talking about? And it sort of is a reminder that the warp capability line that is drawn by the Federation is in itself an arbitrary line. The idea is, I think, that once you're going through space at warp speeds, you're obviously going to encounter other civilizations. But who says it shouldn't be cloaking? Who says it shouldn't be some other level?

But also, outside of *Voyager*, we have *Enterprise* and the first contact with the Vulcans. We learn in *Enterprise* that after first contact, Vulcans stay on Earth for the next 90 years, directing the science that humans are doing to get to warp-capable starships and in many cases, holding them back because they don't think humans are ready. So, Vulcans claim to have a very similar policy of noninterference. But once humans passed that warp barrier, they apparently didn't care anymore?

Janet: Or it was like, "Close enough," right?

Sue: Yeah. [chuckles]

Jarrah: So, okay, you've proved yourselves as close to this club as you're going to get on your own and now just because it's going to be painful for us to watch you get the rest of the way, we will come and help you, you poor round-eared creatures.

Sue: But also, make sure that you don't go too fast because we don't trust you.

Janet: Well, and let's say fair. I don't think the Vulcans necessarily read Earthlings wrong on that.

Jarrah: But I think that on a positive note, that does speak to the what you were saying about this can't be one and done. Because if you're looking back at our real world, you need to have relationships, diplomatic relationships. And that's also how you navigate getting involved or not in situations where conflicts are purely internal. Because if you just zip in at warp speed, materialize, and you get a message from one side saying, "Ah, we're in the middle of a civil war, please help," it's really hard to get all of the information and the context that you need from this brand-new situation to determine whether that side is being oppressed, whether you have a role to play that's not harmful or minimally harmful. So, the need to have those long-term relationships and obviously it was pretty fraught between the humans and the Vulcans, but it worked out okay.

Sue: Mm-hmm. So, is there any specific example that anyone wants touch on that, I did not bring up, as we are coming to the end of our time here today?

Jarrah: I'll just say that we could obviously talk about this for a lot longer and this is not a list. We are not hitting all of the episodes that we could possibly hit to touch on the Prime Directive. But I feel like we covered some good broad themes and I really, really appreciated this discussion.

Janet: Yeah. And I don't have particular like, "Here's the violation of the Prime Directive," is strongest with me, where I still have sort of a residual memory beer buzz from the drinking game of, "Ah, there it is." But it feels like the Prime Directive in some ways is the centerpiece

of the ethical question of how do we go forth? How do we explore without messing it up, without breaking it? How do we explore while recognizing that there's no way to be in the world without having ripples somehow?

There's a way that we imagine the world as sort of separate from us that is, I think, just a fundamental misrepresentation of what it's like for us to be in a world. And I like that *Star Trek* makes us grapple with it and makes us recognize that being here is having an effect. It is setting causal chains in motion. And we do own the consequences of those ethically. But that doesn't mean that we have the opportunity to bench ourselves either. We're here, we're in it. So, we've got to figure out how to make it work not just for us, but for the others we come in contact with.

Sue: So, where's the middle ground? Is there a middle ground between sticking your nose in everyone's business and making yourself the morality police of the galaxy and standing by to allow exploitation or disease or global extinctions?

Janet: I think to the extent that there's a middle ground, it probably has to involve something like trading zones. It has to involve spaces where the people who are engaging with each other, where none of them are quite on their home turf, where everyone has to recognize that they're a visitor and that the customs are not taken for granted, but they're being co-created and co-negotiated.

Jarrah: Yeah, I think it's about-- if I was going to create things from scratch, I think I like the idea of, these conversations are important to have. So, it's not about not having the conversations, it's about digging in more on the conversations. And *Star Trek* only gives us an hour an episode, so we don't always get that opportunity. But imagining that Starfleet was going to do this, that they would be having more robust debates involving more people, and where appropriate, involving the people that they're discussing. And that's challenging because you're still debating within this framework that is Federation centric, but building a dialogue. And I like the idea about the importance of equalizing the turf a little bit and potentially considering the questions that are raised by the other side as well.

Sue: All right. Yeah. The last thing I think I wanted to end on is actually from a piece you wrote for Forbes, Janet, [laughs] that I will link in our show notes that essentially, if I'm summarizing it correctly, you sort of come to the conclusion that the Prime Directive is a strange rule for an organization to have when that primary goal of that organization is to seek out new life and new civilizations.

Janet: Right, Yeah, I did actually say that the easiest way not to violate the Prime Directive would be just to stay home. And we know that's not what *Star Trek* is about. So, yeah, once you figure out that just the very act of voyaging out and making contact possible, you're likely to have a hard time living within the Prime Directive as officially articulated, I think that means you need to figure out what ways of contact come the closest to the spirit of the thing. And part of that has to be listening to the people whose everyday whatever, you're potentially really, really changing just by beaming down. But listening's good. So, it's a skill that every Starfleet member could cultivate.

Sue: Absolutely. Well, I think that's about all the time we have for today. Thank you so, so much for joining us for this conversation. Where can people find you on the internet if they would like to follow you or read more of your works?

Janet: The easiest place to find me on the internet these days, except when Twitter is down, is on Twitter. My handle there is [@docfreeride](#). And yeah, also if you're a student of San Jose State, you could take a philosophy class with me.

[laughter]

Sue: Awesome. Jarrah?

Jarrah: I am on Twitter [@jarrahpenguin](#).

Sue: And I'm Sue. You can find me on Twitter [@spalltor](#). To learn more about our show or to contact us, visit [womenatwarp.com](#) or find us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram [@womenatwarp](#). You can also email us at crew@womenatwarp.com. And for more Roddenberry podcasts, visit [podcasts.rodnenberry.com](#). Thanks so much for joining us.

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