The Giver: Euthanasia And Moral Standards

Euthanasia is it really what Jonas's community practices. Euthanasia is the practice of ending someone's life when he/she are very sick, when there is really no foreseeable chance of survival, and they are undergoing excruciating physical or psychological/emotional pain. It is done out of a deep sense of humanity, of empathy for the other's misery, in order to ease their unbearable suffering. However, is that really what the community Lois Lowry created carries out? I personally think Jonas' community does not practice euthanasia but a form of very cruel eugenics, which is the practice of ending someone's life because they have a defect or are just simply different from everybody else or because they are old and have become a burden for society because they are no longer productive. In the community, this "euthanasia" is applied to very old citizens even though they are not at all in a terminal state. It is also carried out on newborn children and, as the novel shows, not necessarily because they are unhealthy or have any type of illness or problem but because they do different things or are different from the rest. Jonas's father "euthanized" one of two newly born twin babies just because the community had forbid the existence of two people genetically identical (which seems, on the other hand a paradoxical rule in a world shaped by Sameness, that had banned colors and music and emotions for the sake of limiting the negative effects of individuality). The criterion to choose which baby should be put to sleep was that of a very drastic and pseudoscientific eugenics: the baby was 50 ounces lighter than his twin was. The same can be said of the final decision to give Gabriel the killing jab: he was not sleeping well (and it was wrongly assumed that this had something to do with a defective development when in fact the toddler was just missing his new acquired family). Crude, even almost random or whimsical eugenics. Even Rosemary's voluntary decision to ask for release cannot be compared at all with our concept of euthanasia. Rosemary's request was accepted by the elders because it was understood that she was psychologically unstable. She was, thus, no longer fully functional to the community and nothing was done to try to help her overcome her distress or to discourage her to ask for her release.

Moral standards and qualms about ending a person's life are completely different in our society. Here even euthanasia in its stricter sense, the way he have defined it above is illegal in most countries, because there is a sort of sacred halo attached to life itself, to the preservation of life at all costs that has its roots in the traditional religious worldviews that have shaped morality so far. Things are changing, because our modern secular world has become to value more the avoiding of unnecessary pain than life itself. That is why some doctors do carry it out even though it is illegal in their country, risking charges for manslaughter or even murder. Euthanasia can be done in many different ways for many reasons, intentional killing, by act or omission.

If you think about it, what the community practiced was a very cruel form of eugenics, very much like the one the Nazis practiced during their 12 years of totalitarian racist regime in Germany and other parts of Europe. In the name of eugenics (a word that comes from the Greek, meaning better (eu) gens (genics)) they tried to create a genetically improved society by exterminating all kinds of individuals they thought were genetically defective: Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, Blacks, because they belonged to genetically inferior races; retarded people, people born with hereditary diseases, homosexuals (another kind of genetically defective flaw) and, of course, communists and other kinds of political opponents who have shown to be inferior for

refusing to acknowledge the righteousness of the eugenic Reich.

In The Giver, just as in the Nazi Reich, eugenics is euphemistically called something else so that nobody thinks of it as what it really is, so that not a chance is given for anyone to develop a sense of guilt. In the Reich, it was the “final solution”, here is “release” and the horrible practice has been made an event to celebrate. As people have their emotions dulled by the daily intake of some sort of pill, they do not have the empathy to feel what they are doing is wrong. Going back on what I said about eugenics being practiced on newborn babies: how can a normal person not naturally feel that being the lightest of two twins or having trouble to sleep at night, but otherwise being perfectly healthy can never be a reason to give a baby a lethal injection. The Giver describes a very unsettling dystopian totalitarian society, a sort of combination of the worst of communist totalitarianism (individual differences merge into a grey mediocre Sameness, the economy is completely controlled by the political authorities, social roles are assigned by the Elders) and the worst Nazi totalitarianism (the state puts itself the service of a carefully designed survival of the fittest policy) with very hard repressive measures, as in both historical cases, for those who break the rules (the Pilot at the beginning of the novel risked being released; for Jonas it would have been his unescapable fate had he been caught).

To conclude, I think we should not be looking at the Giver as an example or an inspiration to reflect about what euthanasia should be in our society but to look at it as a way to understand how far can it go if we do not put strong ethical limits. My personal opinion of euthanasia is that it should not become completely legal, but should be carried out in very extreme situations, when the person is unbearably suffering and can no longer hold the pain. Any doctor or any person that is not the one suffering should not decide it. I think it is very important that the operation should be carried out only if and when the person wants it to be, just like Rosemary did.