

Science Unfair

Valentina's high school biology teacher has paired up students for a project and announced that the partnerships are final. The assignment involves crafting and executing an experiment and will take each group approximately a month to complete. At the end of the term, each group will be responsible for writing and delivering a report of their findings. The project will be worth a third of each student's grade.

Valentina's partner is Gerald, one of the worst students in the class. Gerald doesn't care about biology and only signed up for the class because he was required to do so. All year long, he's put in the bare minimum effort and, as a result, has fallen behind. Valentina, on the other hand, is an unusually good biology student. She is also highly motivated, driven by a desire to attend a prestigious college. Despite her excellent scores on every test so far, however, Valentina knows that the group project will determine her final grade in the class.

When Valentina and Gerald meet to design their experiment, it quickly becomes clear that after almost a full year of slacking off, Gerald has neither the knowledge nor the skill to contribute to a successful project. He gamely offers to help, but both he and Valentina know that he would almost certainly be a hindrance if he got involved; Valentina would just have to re-do everything he did! Ultimately, Valentina decides that the assignment is too important to leave to chance, and tells Gerald not to attempt to make any significant contributions. Gerald feels guilty, but also relieved—he hadn't fully appreciated that his laziness might affect any other student negatively, and he's glad that he won't be responsible for bringing Valentina's grade down by doing substandard work. To be honest, he's also at least a little bit happy that his grade will get a boost because of Valentina's excellent work.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) To what extent, if any, is academic laziness ethically problematic? If it depends, what does it depend on?
- (2) Suppose Gerald wanted to contribute meaningfully to the project. Would Valentina have been morally obligated to risk her grade by allowing him to take on major responsibilities? Why or why not?
- (3) Should Valentina tell the teacher that Gerald did not contribute to the project? Why or why not?