Empathy, or the ability to share what others feel, is considered by many philosophers and scientists to be foundational to human morality. Empathy can facilitate pro-social outcomes such as charity, cooperation, and tolerance. Yet empathy appears to fail in many cases: it is less responsive to suffering of large numbers (e.g., genocides and natural disasters) and out-groups (e.g., drug addicts). According to some, this “dark side” of empathy makes it an unreliable basis for moral decisions and public policy. In this talk, I will present evidence that these apparent limits of empathy can result from strategic choices to avoid costs of empathy. I will present evidence that motivation to avoid empathy can explain “compassion collapse” for large numbers of victims and the dehumanization of stigmatized out-groups. I will also present evidence that people generally view empathy as effortful, which motivates empathy avoidance. I will close by discussing implications for the complex relationship between empathy and morality. In sum, empathy may only be as limited as we want it to be.

Tuesday, January 19, 4 pm
Refreshments served at 3:45
335 Shillman Hall