INTRODUCTION

In the late eighteenth century, philanthropy was seen as an important instrument by which both the nation and the child could be transformed. Central to this chapter is the thesis that the two mainstream philanthropies then developing – ‘modern’ utilitarian philanthropy, and Christian philanthropy – approximated closely to each other, notwithstanding their differences in principle and the fact that to some extent they competed. Special attention will be given to the Netherlands, but the situation in Belgium, France and England will also be briefly examined.

‘Modern’ philanthropy was in the vanguard. It developed in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and took the form of an enlightened, ambitious, neutral or even, in France, an anti-clerical movement. It was founded on the idea of the elevation of the poor, including their children, by pedagogical and educative strategies. Traditional charity, a Christian virtue, was based on performing the seven works of charity in order, eventually, to reach God. Christian philanthropy, though having its roots in traditional charity, came into being as a reaction to modern philanthropy and its sources of inspiration, such as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Contemporaries, especially in France, laid out the differences between modern and Christian philanthropies in dictionaries and encyclopaedias.1 Among other things, they identified the two as
differing in their goals. Modern philanthropy aimed at horizontal goals: it was directed to the well-being of other people. The final goal of its Christian counterpart was a vertical one; it was directed to God. Victor Hugo, in *Les Misérables*, emphasized these differences, contrasting tradition/revolution and charity/philanthropy. In 1905, Kirkman Gray was thinking along the same lines, contrasting philanthropy with traditional charity, as well as with the modern social policy of the Welfare State.²

The primary difference between the two philanthropies can be made clear by focusing on their attitudes to social marginality.³ Scholars like Stuart Woolf and Bronislaw Geremek emphasize the fluid character of marginality and the relativity of the condition of being poor, because, in the words of Geremek, ‘lack of stability is precisely what characterised the individuals and groups who composed it’.⁴ The concept of marginality entails a spatial metaphor, dividing social space into a central part and a periphery.⁵ In between lies an intermediate area, fragile existence.⁶ From this vulnerable state, people can be forced into a marginal existence by political or economic events, or at particular phases in the life cycle.

Since the late Middle Ages, institutions had been founded for specific groups of marginals, for example the ill, criminals, orphans and the insane.⁷ Orphanages were the only institutions explicitly intended for children. Children placed in them were above all children of marginals.⁸ The aim of traditional Christian charity was to make life for those with a marginal standard of living more humane, while maintaining differences in standards of living. ‘Christian philanthropy’ was organized along the same principles as traditional charity. Modern philanthropy, emerging with mercantile capitalism, by contrast not only aimed at making life for the poor and the marginals more humane, but also at eliminating the marginals as a specific social group. Educational strategies formed the core of this activity. These strategies were targeted at the poor, and their children in particular, trying to transform the inner marginals’ self by elevating them from marginality and fragility into persons, capable of living independently and of having, permanently, a normal standard of living.

Although contemporaries drew these contrasts, in reality there were many common features between these philanthropic movements. Christian philanthropists, as we shall see, adopted many of the views of the new philanthropy. The picture is further complicated by contrasts between Catholic and Protestant philanthropy. Although ‘Christian philanthropy’ existed in both Catholic and Protestant