

giving an impression of great concentration. The grooming bouts may be interspersed with sudden scratchings or nibblings, directed at specific irritations. Most mammals only scratch with the back foot, but a monkey or ape can use either back or front. Its front limbs are ideally suited to the cleaning tasks. The nimble fingers can run through the fur and locate specific trouble spots with great accuracy. Compared with claws and hooves, the primate's hands are precision 'cleaners'. Even so, two hands are better than one, and this creates something of a problem. The monkey or ape can manage to bring both its hands into play when dealing with its legs, flanks, or front, but cannot really get to grips efficiently in this way with its back, or the arms themselves. Also, lacking a mirror, it cannot see what it is doing when it is concentrating on the head region. Here, it can use both hands, but it must work blind. Obviously, the head, back and arms are going to be less beautifully groomed than the front, sides and legs, unless something special can be done for them.

The solution is social grooming, the development of a friendly mutual aid system. This can be seen in a wide range of both bird and mammal species, but it reaches a peak of expression amongst the higher primates. Special grooming invitation signals have been evolved here and social 'cosmetic' activities are prolonged and intense. When a groomer monkey approaches a groomee monkey, the former signals its intentions to the latter with a characteristic facial expression. It performs a rapid lip-smacking movement, often sticking its tongue out between each smack. The groomee can signal its acceptance of the groomer's approach by adopting a relaxed posture, perhaps offering a particular region of its body to be groomed. As I explained in an earlier chapter the lipsmacking action has evolved as a special ritual out of the repeated particle-tasting movements that take place during a bout of fur-cleaning. By speeding them up and making them more exaggerated and rhythmic, it has been possible to convert them into a conspicuous and unmistakable visual signal.

Because social grooming is a co-operative, non-