What is it like to be a Chess Grandmaster?

The title of this presentation plays on Thomas Nagel's famous essay on subjectivity, "What is it like to be a bat?", but substantively I will contrast some conventional or 'folk' notions of perceiving, thinking and deciding with my experience of playing the game at a high level. As a chess Grandmaster with some cognitive science background, I am familiar with the literature on pattern recognition and 'vision' in chess, but am also acutely aware of what the existing research leaves out, in particular how 'thinking' is experienced at the board. My presentation will be grounded in personal experience and structured by conceptual distinctions about thinking in practice, including intuition and calculation, knowing-that and knowing-how, why understanding is qualitatively different in hindsight and foresight, why the best move is not always the right move, and the centrality of emotion and volition in shaping decisions.

A central contention is that successful chess thinking requires an awareness of the challenges of cognitive load, of seeing and evaluating manifold factors on the board, in oneself and about the opponent, and doing so clearly enough to inform a decision. In essence, this amounts to a question of how to simplify complexity without adulterating it.

I will argue that the best practical players are not necessarily those with the deepest knowledge or understanding of the game, but those who have developed thinking heuristics to reduce cognitive load during play, and thereby make better decisions under time pressure.

I am conscious that most of the audience will not be experienced chess players, and as a regular media commentator on chess in the UK, I look forward to communicating the technical aspects of the game to a wide audience without over-simplifying.