Carlos Steel has given us a reconstruction of Proclus' doctrine of the ontological status of evils that restores some of the seriousness of what Proclus is saying, and helps us to see the differences between Proclus and the trivializing treatment of evils that the pseudo-Dionysius bequeathed to posterity in place of the genuine Procline doctrine. I have some doubts, not so much about Steel's reconstruction of Proclus, as about some contrasts he draws between Proclus and other philosophers. I will mention some of these doubts briefly, but most of my comments are intended, not to disagree with anything Steel has said, but to add some context that may help in understanding how the question about the ontology of evils arises, for Proclus and also for earlier philosophers.

I'll start with some doubts. Steel thinks that much of the history of philosophy has devoted itself to a Panglossian trivialization of evil, and he is concerned to rescue Proclus from assimilation to this tradition. Steel’s picture of the pseudo-Dionysius seems convincing. But I wonder how much damage the pseudo-Dionysius did. It seems to me that the decisive figure for the later Western tradition on evil was Augustine, not the pseudo-Dionysius, and Augustine (reflecting, in his own way, on Neoplatonic accounts of evil) does not trivialize or explain away as the pseudo-Dionysius does. Admittedly, Augustine does not say that evil is the privation of a good, and the pseudo-Dionysius was important in adding this technical terminology, which allows the doctrine of evil to be incorporated in the Aristotelian framework. But this is mostly a question of terminology: Augustine does say that evil is not a nature but the corruption of a nature, where “corruption” means a loss of the “measure, form and order” with which God endows a nature (De Natura Boni 4). It is a correct interpretation to say that Augustine thinks that evil is a privation of the good; and this thought was the starting-point for the whole series of Augustine’s reflections on evil, and for the reflections of later medieval thinkers as well. I do not think they were led too badly astray by the pseudo-Dionysius.

I have doubts about the pre-Procline as well as about the post-Procline tradition. Proclus begins the De Malorum Subsistentia (henceforth DMS) by stating and refuting the views of those who deny that evil exists. Steel says the Stoics thought that evil was merely a lesser good, and he suggests
that the view Proclus is criticizing is some (perhaps Platonized) version of this Stoic position. But this is simply not the Stoic view of evil. The Stoics think that evil has exactly the same ontological status that good does. They say that evil is "vice or what participates in vice," as good is "virtue or what participates in virtue" (Diogenes Laertius VII 94-5). That is: virtue, virtuous actions, and virtuous persons (whether human beings or gods) are good; vice, vicious actions, and vicious persons are bad; and everything else is neither good nor bad. One consequence is that while there is not much evil in the universe as a whole, and a great deal of good, since Zeus and his virtue are omnipresent, still human life contains many evils and indifferents but almost no goods, since there have been roughly one or two virtuous human beings since the last ἐκτρύγωσις (Alexander of Aphrodisias De Fato 199). This is not especially Panglossian; and however cheerful or gloomy it may be, it does not maintain that evil is a lesser good (the Stoics actually deny that good and evil have degrees, Diogenes Laertius VII 101, Cicero De Finibus III xxi 69), and it has nothing in common with the doctrine Proclus criticizes at the beginning of the DMS, which pushes the ontological claim that evils are not beings per se to the extreme conclusion that evils do not exist at all.

Who then are Proclus' opponents here? They may be Neoplatonists, though no extant Neoplatonic text (except perhaps the pseudo-Dionysius!) seems to take this approach. But I think it is more likely that Proclus simply made them up. This issue raises some larger questions about Proclus' method in the DMS.

The DMS is a thoroughly scholastic work. It raises a series of questions about evil, and deals with them in logical order, beginning with the logically first question, an sit: and it raises, and in due course resolves, arguments on both sides of this question. Proclus need not be reporting the arguments of actual philosophers who have held the two opposite positions. What is striking about the opposed arguments of the DMS is that they all presuppose a basic commitment to Proclus' metaphysics. Thus the arguments that evil does not exist proceed on the assumption that all causality proceeds top-down, with each thing being produced by a higher principle and striving to "return" to that higher principle, and that all beings proceed ultimately from a single first principle, a good beyond being. And Proclus makes equally casual use of Neoplatonic assumptions in arguing the other side. The DMS is not trying to resolve a real dispute between radically opposed pictures of the universe. Rather, like much of Proclus' writing, it starts from strong assumptions (argued for in the Elements of Theology) about the different levels of being, about the causal relations between them, and about what predicates can apply at different