My comments are all concerned with the philosophical interpretation of Tarski’s definition; they are divided, as much as Wójcicki’s paper, in two main parts: I will start off with commenting on the so-called “key assumptions of Tarski’s theory of truth” to then turn on to “the referential variant” of the theory in question. But, first of all, there is a general worry I would like to voice: I am unclear about the very main point that Wójcicki is trying to make in his paper. Is it that Tarski’s notion of truth is the correspondence notion or is it rather that it is the deflationary notion but his definition somehow contributes to our understanding of the idea of truth? Both theses seem to get some support from Wójcicki’s considerations, at different parts of the paper at stake. To put it slightly differently, I am not quite sure about what Wójcicki takes it to be “the rather substantial misunderstanding of Tarski’s analyses” reflected by “the puzzlement concerning the point of Tarski’s investigations” (page 1).

1. On the key assumptions part

1a. After giving a rather concise presentation of Tarski’s definition, Wójcicki starts off by pointing out that it is in virtue of Tarski’s assumption according to which the metalanguage (ML) should contain the object language (L) as its proper part that the statement of the truth-conditions for any given sentence of L takes the form of an instance of the so-called “scheme T”, such as the famous

(1) “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white.

He then goes on saying that statements like (1) seem to be “a direct implementation of the default idea of truth” (page 2), which, though familiar to Tarski and other Polish logicians, was rejected by the first one as “misconceived” (page 2). According to Wójcicki, the basis for Tarski’s rejection was the fact that any
sentence like (1) is, given the previous mentioned assumption, just a shorthand for a sentence of the likes of

(2) “Snow is white” is true if and only if
the state of affairs that “Snow is white” describes obtains.
—on the grounds that the statement of the sentence in the right-hand side of the biconditional amounts to the statement that its truth conditions do obtain or are satisfied. Wójcicki then concludes that Tarski’s biconditionals should be interpreted “in the vein of the correspondence idea”.

Well, what does Wójcicki really mean by an interpretation of Tarskian biconditionals “in the vein of the correspondence idea”? Does he thereby intend to defend the correspondence interpretation of Tarski’s definition? If he does, I don’t agree, and I think that the grounds he appeals to in its favor are feeble for very known reasons.

First of all, (1) does not seem to be tantamount to (2) because (1) but not (2) is compatible with thinking that the truth-conditions for “Snow is white” do not constitute its meaning or, in other words, are independent of it. I will say more on this below.

Secondly, and tightly related to the previous point, Wójcicki does not seem to allow for the distinction between Tarski’s intentions and interests in constructing his definition, on the one hand, and the content of the very definition proposed, on the other. The historical fact that Tarski repudiated the deflationary conception (or, in Wójcicki’s terms, the default idea of the definition of truth) and wanted instead to honor the Aristotelian one cannot be appealed to in order to settle the theoretical question of whether his definition is in fact an instance of correspondence truth or not. In other words, Tarski may well have deeply wanted to do justice to the classical account and even tried to put his definition into that theoretical framework but this cannot be taken to make for an argument for his success in this regard—on the assumption, above set, that this part of Wójcicki’s paper does contain an argument for the correspondence interpretation.

1b. Wójcicki criticizes the thesis that “a Tarski style definition of truth grasps the extension of the predicate ‘true’ but does not capture its meaning”, which he finds “unwarranted” (page 2). In support of his position, he claims that Tarski has put a constraint on the construction of T-biconditionals, according to which they should be not just true but analytically true, namely, “they should capture the right truth-conditions for the sentence in question” (page 2). This constraint is also known as “the translational constraint”, namely, the condition that the sentence used in the right-hand side of a T-biconditional should be a translation (in cases like (1), a mere homofonic one) of the sentence mentioned in its left-hand side. Wójcicki seems to be claiming that the imposition of this constraint on Tarski’s part should be construed as reflecting his interest in conforming his definition to the meaning of the truth-predicate. There are several points I want to make in relation to this fragment of the paper.
First of all, once again, it is not clear to me whether the author’s critique of the above mentioned thesis involves a defense of the correspondence interpretation or not. In general, those who think that Tarski’s definition gives only the extension but not the meaning of the concept of truth are those who take it to exemplify the deflationary conception. Does Wójcicki then want to take the opposite part, namely, to side with the correspondentist? The main problem with a negative answer to this question is that there does not seem to be any alternative construal (see, though, a suggestion below) of the idea that “truth” has a meaning, aside from the usual thesis that the meaning in question is a real property such as correspondence, representation or reference—it could also be an epistemic property such as verifiability under ideal conditions or the likes but such epistemic candidates for truth are explicitly ruled out by Tarski himself.

Second, on the assumption that he does want to take the correspondence side, what he says does not seem to be relevant to his purpose. The translational constraint requires that the sentence used in the right-hand side of a T-biconditional should translate the sentence mentioned or described in its left-hand side, that is, that both sentences should have the same meaning, however this is explained, for the truth-predicate to fulfil the disquotational role displayed through the biconditional scheme. Now, the correspondence interpretation requires something quite different: from this perspective, the right-hand side contains not only a specification of the truth-conditions of the sentence mentioned in the other side but also an explanation of its meaning: it gives us both the truth-conditions and the meaning of the sentence or, in probable better terms, in giving the truth-conditions it gives us its meaning. This is certainly a difficult issue, but my point could be made clearer in the following terms: the translational constraint takes meanings of sentences for granted and requires that, whatever they would be, they should be the same for the two sentences involved in a T-biconditional; in contrast, what may be called “the explanatory constraint” requires that the specification of a sentence truth-conditions in terms of another sentence that is displayed in a T-biconditional should amount to an explanation of its meaning: meanings are not taken for granted but explained, in as far as they are identified with the displayed truth-conditions. It is this second constraint that has to be appealed to in order to construe Tarskian biconditionals as correspondence ones; the translational constraint is not enough—it may be worth pointing out that the fact that nothing in Tarski’s theory suggests the explanatory constraint can be taken, in my view, as providing us with grounds for the deflationary interpretation of Tarski’s definition.

Third, when Wójcicki claims that Tarski has the intention to conform his definition to the meaning of the truth-predicate, with the word “meaning” he may be meaning our ordinary or intuitive use—rather than a specific property such as correspondence. But, if this is so, it is not clear to me why he takes his position to oppose the one represented by those who think that a Tarski style definition of truth grasps the extension but not the meaning of “true”, namely, the deflationists. Wójcicki seems not to be conscious of an ambiguity ascribable to the word “meaning”: from the deflationist’s point of view, “truth” or “true” has a meaning, in the sense of use, but does not have a meaning, in the sense of a real property related to the word in question. Arguing that Tarski’s definition allows for the first
sense of “meaning” is no resource against Tarskian deflationism: far from that, it is perfectly compatible with it.

On the other hand, if Wójcicki is hereby intending to endorse the deflationary interpretation, what he says about the translational constraint has to be interpreted as allegedly providing us with an argument for it. But this is unacceptable, given that the translational constraint is compatible with both the correspondence and the deflationary interpretation of Tarski’s definition: as seen before, what distinguishes one from the other is what has been called “the explanatory constraint”. (Moreover, I think that Tarskian biconditionals can be taken to be necessary, and hence in a sense analytical, under both the deflationary and the correspondence interpretation: the only difference is that the first one makes them a priori while the second one takes them to be a posteriori, in as far as they are regarded as the observational consequences of a semantic theory.1)

1c. In the final part of this first section, Wójcicki envisages a related criticism: the idea that Tarski’s definition “in no way contributes to our understanding of what truth is” (page 2). He considers this to be a much more serious criticism, one he agrees that undermines Tarski’s approach. He ends up stating that Tarski’s theory “offers us no explanation of what truth is and hence it does not meet the following most natural requirement: the main task of a theory of truth is to provide an analysis that essentially deepens our understanding of what truth is” (page 3).

I have found this evaluation rather surprising. The deflationist could say that even if Tarski’s analyses do not attribute a substantive meaning to the concept of truth (such as the correspondence meaning above mentioned) they certainly may be taken to contribute to our understanding of this concept. The contribution in question may be considered to be achieved through specifying that our everyday-life use of truth is the use of a deflationary notion—the theory may be taken to provide us with a knowledge-that (a propositional knowledge) of something of which we only have a knowledge-how (a practical knowledge). I think that this argument is perfectly sound, unless we take it for granted that our ordinary notion of truth cannot be a deflationary one.

Contrarily to the author, I do think that Tarski’s theory, even if it defines a deflationary concept, meets the condition stated at the end of the section: the provided analysis may be taken to deepen our understanding of what truth is. Otherwise, we would be implying that the alleged fact that truth is a deflationary concept would make any (deflationary) theory of truth trivial.

Wójcicki’s conclusion seems then to spread out from the assumption that our epistemic progress regarding truth depends on its having a substantive nature—which, being a strange assumption for a deflationist to hold, gives some support to the idea of placing Wójcicki’s interpretation (in as much as this first part of his paper is concerned) under a correspondence heading.

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1 I have tried to defend this point of view in a paper called “Sobre la interpretación deflacionaria de la teoría de Tarski”, AnálisisFilosófico XVII (1997) No1, pp. 49-73.
2. On the referential variant part

The vicious circle argument can be synthesized as follows: to get at the intended model, it is necessary to presuppose that the factual theory in question is true; but to know what truth is (for that theory), it is necessary to define its intended model. Notice that instead of factual theories and intended models, the argument can be reproduced in terms of our natural language and its correspondence or referential meanings, namely, what constitutes the real world around us: to get at the real world, it is necessary to presuppose that our natural language refer; but to know what (objective) reference is, it is necessary to presuppose that there is a real world. The consequence seems to be that there is no objective correspondence or reference, no real world or neither of them. Put in these new terms, the vicious circle argument is akin to Putnam’s model-theoretic argument against the correspondence theory of truth, according to which, on the basis of the existence of multiple reference relations between our words and the world objects, each one depending on the adoption of an alternative referential scheme, it is concluded both that the concept of reference does not have a univocal content and that the world does not have an independent existence. 2 In relation to this, I will only make two brief comments.

First of all, the usual realist’s comments. The justification of a semantic theory for natural language, as much as the justification of any other factual theory, does not involve an infinite regress into a background theory from which the theory in question is justified. There is a referential scheme whose adoption can be externally justified and this is the one that provides us with a univocal content for the concept of reference. In general, it is thought that the content at stake is given by causality or causal relations.

As far as the above mentioned ontological consequence is concerned, the realist takes the entities that a factual theory describes to exist independently of the theory in question; likewise, the world is taken to be there, independently of our language: from her point of view, there is no need to think that the existence of a differentiated world depends on our use of a differentiating language—of course, we cannot talk about the world without using language: this is a truism that does not imply that the world depends on language for its existence.

Secondly, I think that the problem is not that much that the model-theoretic version of Tarski’s theory involves a vicious circle (that disqualifies the correspondence interpretation) but rather that, if the purpose is to found the correspondence idea, this version is as much in need of a complement as the other one: to have a substantive notion of truth, there is something to be added to Tarski’s definition, namely, an explanation, in terms of an externalistic notion such as causality, of the relation between natural language and the world, or, in the preferred epistemological terms, between any factual theory and its intended model. The model-theoretic version of the Tarskian definition seems to make it very clear that the definition in question is a purely formal structure that may give rise to many

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different theories according to the kind of entities involved in the application. Correspondence theory is the resultant one when the involved entities are, roughly, natural language and the real world. The success of the application at stake relies, as is the case with many other empirical theories, on the explanatory power of a central empirical notion—more specifically, causality. Correspondence truth has then be regarded as the product of the combination of the Tarskian definition of truth and the causal explanation of reference.3

What I want to suggest by means of the previous considerations is that in as far as the sole Tarski’s definition is concerned, even if viewed from a model-theoretic perspective, the deflationary interpretation is the correct one: in Tarski’s theory, there is no meaning, in the sense of a substantive natural property, conveyed to truth. But, unlike Wójcicki, I think that this is due not to the force of a vicious circle argument but to the formal character of the very theory. It is clear enough that, in the model-theoretic version, it is not the explanation of empirical reference but rather the explication of the notion of logical truth that can be taken to constitute Tarski’s objective.